

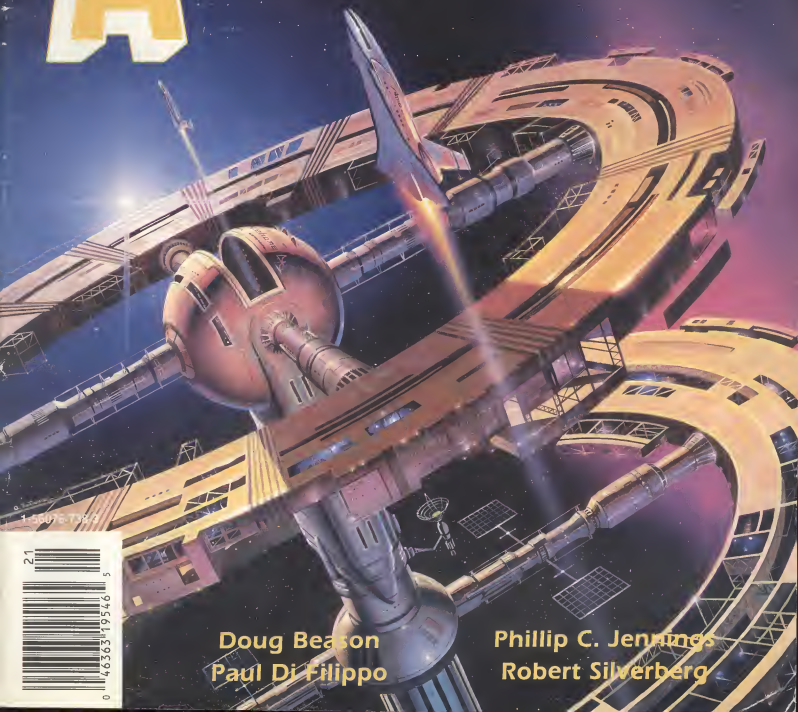
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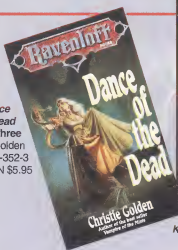
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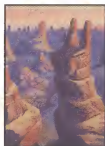
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# Medium Tech

Kim Mohan

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The computer is a marvelous tool. I couldn't do my job without it, and on a personal level I don't see how I could get along without one. Write a letter with a typewriter? Can't imagine it. Write something by hand? If you've ever seen my handwriting, you know that's not a good idea for me to try.

I'm committed to my computer, and I constantly appreciate all the ways in which it makes me more productive and more professional. But in the kind of work I do, there's a limit to how useful computer technology can be.

I can't bear the thought of going back to the days of low tech, in my first magazine job, when the tools of the trade for producing clean, attractive magazine pages were a sharp proofreading eye, an even sharper knife, and a waxing machine for sticking pieces of type into place on the page mockups.

At the same time, I can't foresee a day when editing and publishing will be full-fledged high-tech operations, because in the job of working with fiction there are tasks that a human will always be able to perform better than any computer, no matter how "intelligent" the software of tomorrow might become.

The best present-day example I can offer to illustrate that point is the most recent version of the word-processing program I've been using for several years. The only significant new feature of the program is a grammar checker—a utility that's

supposed to be able to detect problems with punctuation, sentence structure and other technical errors.

When I first heard about this breakthrough, my first thought was, "If it works, it'll be great." My second thought was, "I don't see how it possibly could work." But I gave it the benefit of the doubt. I ran the program on another computer on which it had been installed, and I fed in a file containing the edited version of a typical story.

After about ten minutes, I came to the conclusion that either I'm a very sloppy editor, or this grammar checker is the most inflexible, most useless editing tool since the invention of the eraser.

I didn't keep a record of the details. Suffice it to say that the program flagged virtually every sentence that wasn't constructed in simple subject-verb-object form. Whenever it hit a word or a sequence of words it couldn't make sense out of, a window with a message in it appeared on the screen—messages such as (I'm paraphrasing here) "Might not be a complete sentence" or "Possibly a misplaced modifier," usually followed by a line or two of school-marmy lecture: "Every sentence must contain a subject and a verb."

Well, thanks for that. If the high-tech upgrade of my favorite word processor can't do any better than regurgitating rules that everyone learned in grade school, then I'll stick with the medium-tech version—the one that doesn't try to second-

guess me and the people who write the stories I edit.

This grammar checker might be smart enough to catch technical errors in a Dick and Jane book, I suppose; but then again, if you're editing a Dick and Jane book and you spot errors in it, the smartest thing to do is get a new author. ("See Bobby by write. Bobby writes bad. Run, Bobby, run.")

Again, the story I fed into the checker was what I consider typical: not heavily stylized or "literary," but something composed primarily of straightforward descriptive passages. Some of the sentences were long and complex, but every one of them was easily understandable. Grammar-checking software is going to have to get a lot smarter before it's even marginally useful to the vast majority of professional writers and editors. And even if that day comes, I can't imagine how a grammar checker would be any use at all for working with a story by (for instance) Kathe Koja or Barry N. Malzberg, or any other writer who purposely and skillfully breaks the traditional rules of English syntax and composition.

I'm not putting down the program . . . well, not really. I'm sure some people have found it useful, and the company that made the software has never claimed it would be the answer to every writer's and editor's prayers. But if this is a harbinger of what high tech has to offer, then make mine medium. ♦

# Reflections

## Robert Silverberg

The other day a letter from a bibliographer came in, asking me if so-and-so (a minor but pretty damned good sf writer of the 1950's) was a pseudonym of mine. I would have been glad to claim so-and-so's works as my own, since they were in fact a good deal classier than most of the stuff I was writing during the same era, but I couldn't bring myself to practice such vile deception on an innocent scholar. The query, though, got me thinking once again about that long-ago period when magazines (not paperback books) were the dominant territory of science fiction, and when very prolific writers for those magazines were obliged to conceal their prolificacy under pseudonyms. I discussed this very thing last month in this column; the subject was house names, then—the pseudonyms which were owned and operated by publishing companies as enterprises in common, rather than the private property of individual writers. But—as I cast my mind back over the time when many (not all) of us were varying our outputs under *noms de plume*, I found myself chuckling over the ways some of those pen-names were concocted. And—since there aren't many of us left any more from that era of magazine sf—it seemed a good idea to get a few anecdotes on the record.

For example: one of my own pseudonyms during the 1950's was "Calvin M. Knox." My friend and collaborator Randall Garrett devised it for me early in my career, when I

was having trouble selling stories under my own name to the doyen of science fiction editors, John W. Campbell. Garrett and I were selling him plenty of stuff under our joint and obvious "Robert Randall" pseudonym, but the Silverberg-byline stories kept getting rejected.

"I think it's because he's got an anti-Semitic contents page," Garrett suggested. "He gets along fine with Jews, but he doesn't like Jewish-sounding names." And thereupon Randy concocted the most Protestant-sounding pseudonym he could think of: Calvin M. Knox.

"What does the 'M' stand for?" I asked.

"Moses," he said.

The following week I took a Calvin M. Knox story to Campbell and he bought it on the spot, without reacting to the pen name at all. A few weeks after that I tried him with a Silverberg-byline story, and he bought that too. (And when he used it, he put my name on the cover!) So much for Garrett's theory.

Years later, in a quiet moment at a convention, Campbell asked me about the significance of the pen name. I told him the whole story. He chuckled quietly for a moment. Then he said, "Randy Garrett was right, you know. I never could stand having Jewish names on my contents page. And that's why I never bought any of the stories that a kid named Isaac Asimov used to send me."

Garrett was diabolically crafty when it came to inventing his own

pen names. One—"Darrel T. Langart"—was an anagram of "Randall Garrett," devised at a time when Campbell had told him he had too many Garrett stories in inventory. Randy slipped this by him and Campbell never noticed—in fact, praised the work of the gifted new writer Langart to Garrett one day!

But an even wilder joke on the hapless Campbell was Garrett's "Sam and Janet Argo"—which he put together out of the punchlines of two idiotic knock-knock jokes of the era. One ran:

"Knock-knock."

"Who's there?"

"Sam and Janet."

"Sam and Janet who?"

"Sam and Janet Evening!" (Say it out loud—then sing it!)

And the other one:

"Argo."

"Argo who?"

"Argo screw yourself!"

Only the demented Garrett could have yoked the two dumb jokes. And Campbell, of course, didn't have a clue.

A lot of pseudonyms of those days were simply variations on the writer's own name. When Cyril Kornbluth and Judith Merrill collaborated, they wrote as "Cyril Judd." Robert A. Heinlein occasionally used the pseudonym "Anson MacDonald," taking his middle name and his first wife's maiden name. (Campbell himself had set the precedent for that, coining his famous "Don A. Stuart" pen name from his first wife's full name,

Doña Stuart.) Lester del Rey, whose birth certificate sports a whole raft of names—"Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Alvarez-del Rey"—carved a library shelf full of pseudonyms from them: "Philip St. John," "Marion Henry," "R. Alvarez," and more. John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris did a similar thing to produce "John Beynon" and later "John Wyndham," and then accomplished something quite extraordinary by publishing a collaboration between "Wyndham" and "Lucas Parkes"—not one of his best novels, and perhaps he hoped to blame "Parkes" for any weaknesses it might have.

Then, too, Roger Philip Graham dropped his surname to write as "Rog Phillips." L. Ron Hubbard brought his real first name out of obscurity for "Rene Lafayette." Harry Clement Stubbs put the name of "Hal Clement" on his stories.

In the early 1960's stories bylined "Harrison Denmark" began appearing in *Amazing Stories* and its companion of that time, *Fantastic*. Since the well-known writer Harry Harrison lived in Denmark then, it was all too easy to jump to the conclusion that it was Harry behind the transparent pseudonym. Only he wasn't. The very young Roger Zelazny—who had no idea at all where Harry Harrison lived—was writing the "Harrison Denmark" stories, having chosen the name, apparently, at random.

Not at all random, though, was Poul Anderson's choice of "Winston P. Sanders." It's a Winnie-the-Pooh reference: there's a battered sign reading "Sanders" over the entrance to Winnie's cave, and therefore the

bear tells people that he "lives under the name of Sanders." And Poul occasionally would write under it.

Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore—the masters of the pseudonym, with dozens to their credit—wrote as "Hudson Hastings" in the late 1940's when they lived in the town of Hastings-on-the-Hudson, New York. And "Keith Hammond" 's initials are simply those of Kuttner, reversed. But the hidden significance of such famed Kuttner-Moore bylines as "Lawrence O'Donnell" and "Lewiss Padgett" is unknown to me. Maybe they just liked the sound of the names—as I did when I dreamed up "Ralph Burke," "Dan Malcolm," "David Osborne," and others of mine. (I wrote one as "George Osborne," too, but that was an editor's error.) When I wrote crime stories as "Charles D. Hammer," though, I was punning for some reason on the name of the great French warrior Charles Martel, "Charles the Hammer." (No one ever noticed, not even my French bibliographer.) Edgar Rice Burroughs was punning, too, when he published his first science-fiction story as "Norman Bean." (He meant it to be "Normal Bean," meaning that even though he had written a story set on Mars he was really just a *normal being*, but the editor thought it was a typographical error and corrected it.) James Blish, when he wrote scathing literary essays under the name of "William Atheling, Jr.," was paying homage to his idol, Ezra Pound—whose own critical essays sometimes bore the byline of "William Atheling."

Harlan Ellison writing as "Ellis Hart"—that's easy enough. "Ellis Robertson" marked one of the infrequent

Ellison-Silverberg collaborations of decades gone by. The Ellison pseudonym "Derry Tiger" was a play on the name of a long-ago friend of his. "Cordwainer Bird" was Ellison having fun with the name of "Cordwainer Smith" (itself a pseudonym for Paul M. A. Linebarger). These days, like most of us, Harlan does all his writing under his own name—I think.

A few puzzles. Robert Shekley wrote some fine stories as "Finn O'Donovan." Barry Malzberg did some of his best under the name of "K. M. O'Donnell." Why did these nice Jewish boys want to be Irishmen? (And why did Arthur C. Clarke, who has many fine qualities but can't claim to be Jewish, indulge in the same fantasy once as "E. G. O'Brien"?) Novelist Evan Hunter uses an Irish byline for his mystery stories—"Ed McBain"—but the kicker here is that "Hunter" is a pseudonym too. (His first sf stories originally appeared under the name of S. A. Lombino, and so did he; but I think he changed his name legally to "Evan Hunter" a long time back. Milton Lesser, a science-fiction fan of the 1940's who later wrote many stories for *Amazing*, became more successful as a mainstream novelist as "Stephen Marlowe," and that's his legal name these days. I've seen "Milton Lesser" listed in bibliographies as one of "Stephen Marlowe" 's pseudonyms. Tain't so.

And as for the mysterious character who edits this magazine, and calls himself "Kim Mohan"—

No. No. The world isn't ready for that dread secret yet. ♦



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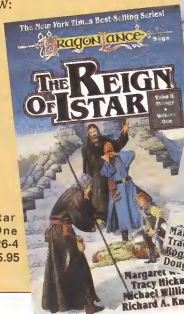
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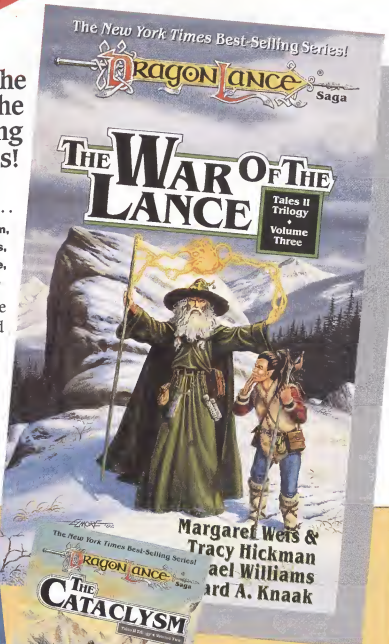
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# Letters

Dear Amazing Stories,

"Amazing, simply amazing" were my thoughts when I first read your magazine (Vol. 66, No. 8). At first I picked it up because of the intriguing cover art. When I looked inside I found the stories to be equally compelling.

A few of the stories of note were "Touches," "Word Salad," "Home Is Where the Heart Is," and "Little Brother's turn to Watch." The great diversity of plots among those just listed above kept me fascinated. Thanks.

Kevin King  
Moriarty NM

Dear Mr. Mohan,

I read with fascination your "I Really Don't Get It" editorial in the July '92 issue. It seems to me that even the most mature writer must accept constructive criticism to continue to grow in the profession. Your comments indicate that many are blind to ideas other than their own. After my stories were rejected a year ago I appreciated the fact that you took the time to comment in detail. Though it is ego deflating I accept your observations. I do not have to question whether or not you read my work, unlike the rejections from many editors. My next submittal will certainly incorporate your suggestions and guidelines. Please keep it up.

Ben Harrington  
Los Alamitos CA

Dear Amazing Stories,

I would like to state for the record that I really dislike your new review section. I can go to a bookstore and get

more information from the back of a book.

As for Kim Mohan's editorial page in this year's 6th issue, if the new review section is so close to what other magazines have, I would have thought that was a good reason not to have it. Who cares if your list is more complete and correct than anyone else's? Your mainstream SF reader doesn't have time to read everything. Who are you selling to? Other editors, reviewers, and teenagers (who have time to read everything)?

I am middle class, 30 and female. I do not have time to read one-hundredth of what is released. I really appreciated having reviews that were intelligent, well thought out, and discriminating. Your current reviews are a waste of paper and now the only section of the magazine I don't read.

Bronwyn Richardson  
Issaquah WA

Dear Mr. Mohan,

For a long time, I wondered what sort of cosmic upheaval would be required to bring about my taking laser toner to paper and submitting an editorial letter to your magazine. The cataclysm arose in an unexpected manner, catching me unprepared. (Don't they always?)

It started out a few months ago, rather innocently at first. Initially I thought, "Oh, it's Roger Zelazny's 30th anniversary. Okay. Zelazny's worth it." Then came the next issue and it was Ursula K. Le Guin's 30th, to be followed one month later by Thomas M. Disch hitting the magic number, and something was still conspicuously absent. Coincidence?

Memories of an editorial response in which you stated that poetry's demise in

your magazine was partially due to reader apathy danced lazily in my head. I began to smell a concealed agenda. Poetic fillers, I could live without, but this?

Simply put . . . I enjoy reading comments from other readers of the magazine, knowing that there are others like myself taking active participation in this publication. Is this the end of the letters page? Has Amazing stilled the Vox Populi?

Gérard M. Gagné  
Kitchener, Ontario

*In a word, no. We like getting letters, and we like publishing them. This page was absent for a few issues because of layout considerations that forced us to use page 8 for other purposes, but it returned in the December issue and we'll try to make it a regular feature from now on.*

Dear Editor,

While recently browsing a bookstore in downtown Atlanta, I came across the Roger Zelazny's 30th Anniversary Special Issue of *Amazing Stories*. Let's see . . . isn't *Amazing* a drugstore magazine usually found between *Today's Mercenary* and *Real Crime*? It would appear that is no longer the case.

Having enjoyed Zelazny's Amber novels, I decided to give *Amazing Stories* a try. I'm glad I did! Not only is Zelazny in top form in this issue, but *all* of the other stories are extremely enjoyable. I especially like Koke and Bond's "Dead-wise." I was disappointed to learn they have little else in print.

I am extremely impressed with both the content and presentation of *Amazing Stories*. Keep up the good work.

Michael Johnson  
Jonesboro GA

# WINDANCE

DOUG BEASON



Illustration By  
Pat Morrissey

J.A. MORRISSEY

The cliff plummets two miles straight down in front of me. A river at the bottom winds to the horizon through unbroken rocky fields. The sky is blue, cloudless. Wind whips around my head, blowing dirt and dust into my face.

I push back my hair, but the strands keep flying around. I try to keep my lip from quivering. I do not really need to step over the edge, but I must.

What else can a seven-year-old girl do but what she is asked? Do what she has been . . . *groun* to do?

My people stand behind me. They wait in silence, even though the wind keeps up its ungodly howl, trying to pull me up. My people wear saffron robes, red cloth hats tied to their heads and sandals. Their ceremonial clothes contrast with the normal torn cloths that we usually wear.

I cannot turn back. They have waited too long for me to take the message. . . . I must step out.

They have endured too many treks for me to let them down. And yet the fear grows in me—fear of falling, of my body dashing against the great cliff. Feeling the pain. My bones breaking. My blood running against the dry rocks, only to evaporate and leave a dry residue against the cliffside.

And below—is anybody there to see me? Will anyone find my body?

But no. That is to think, to *wish* that the worst will come of my journey. My people would not have brought me here; my mother would not have prepared me; and I would not have wanted to come if that were true.

For the winds will lift me up. As mother has promised. Lift me to those awaiting our plea.

I turn my head and force a smile at the people standing behind me. There is Namora, my younger sister. She looks splendid, her colored robe dyed from the leaves of a *gaiberrin* bush. How proud I know she must feel. Proud that her sister would be brought up in the ways of the dance.

The thought comforts me, even as I turn back to the rugged cliff face. It has dominated my thoughts for as long as I can remember. I remember hearing Mother speak of dancing with the winds, to throw back my head and arms, to allow the rushing air to carry me up.

I remember the message I am to take, the tale of our journeys and the hope that we can return to the heavens.

The failures of the other girls do not concern me. Even six months ago when Soloette stepped out over the cliff. The wind picked her up, tossed her back and forth as a summer flower on the dry plateau. She rose in the dance, and we thought that maybe *she* would be the one.

Until she twisted, slipped through the air and fell down onto the craggy rocks. As even I might do—

As I will *never* do!

I set my mouth. I look over the precipice and remember the years I have lived, preparing for this moment, to bend back and dance with the wind. . . .

I am hungry, as always, but the steppes are wet today.

The inch of rain that will fall is half of what comes during the short rainy season. It comes without warning,

although we have been waiting for weeks. Water rushes past our tent, an explosion of wetness from the sky. Crumbling *rabisch* furs that cover our roof now soak up the water and swell, their brown-and-white speckled hair dripping, the weight making the tent poles creak.

I run outside, momentarily forgetting the pain in my stomach. Namora squeals as she opens her mouth and tries to catch the drops. Water spills past my feet, I sink into the mud. Rocks as big as my hand tumble past, swept up in the brown swirling flood. All around me the rain pours down; I squint but still cannot see more than a few feet.

I jump in the beautiful water and dance from side to side. I throw back my head and pretend to windance. The sensation is too much for words. Wetness envelops me. It streams into my eyes. Is this what grandmother means when she tells of her mother taking baths? At the bottom of the great cliff, where the river flows, some have said that beyond the horizon is a great body of water in which people can stand over their heads. But I have never seen the water, even sitting on father's shoulders.

I lie on the ground and allow the water to run over me. Rocks carried by the current hit me, but I do not care. I dig my fingers into the soft ground, trying to squeeze more of the wonderful liquid from the mud.

Someone prods me with a foot. Looking up, I see my grandmother, water pouring down her thick body. Her hair mats against her head. She presses her lips together but does not scold me. She waits and says nothing. I feel embarrassed at ignoring my chores. Even with the coming of the water, we still must keep to the schedule. I struggle to my feet and stand to help her.

Mother squats inside the tent. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. Water drips from the cloth ceiling, splashing and pooling on the ground. She scrapes clean our pots, metal vessels that are seasoned and covered with grease. As layers of dirt and animal fat come off the metallic surface, another woman inspects the pots, making sure that none of the protective covering remains on them. When they are scrubbed, scoured by handfuls of dirt, we take them out into the rain. Soon, scores of containers are lining the ground, each filling with the life-giving water.

We bring in pots of the skywater and fill our water-skins—four times a year we collect the water that pours from the sky, and we celebrate its abundance.

Namora laughs and skips through the torrential down-pour. Only four years old, little sister jumps up, splashes and throws her arms out, the festivity of having more water around her than she can drink. She is young enough to enjoy the revelry.

She does not know that it will end. Too soon the water will stop falling, and the land will return to parched dryness. And then we will make our way across the plateau to the great cliff for the next rain.

Now that I am seven, I am expected to help my family, our people, in any way possible. After all, if I am now old enough to windance, then accordingly I must contribute to our survival.

Even if I must die.

Lessons again. Practicing the dance and memorizing the long-dead phrases that my grandmother's mother once used. The forced pronunciation of words that do not make any sense.

What does it matter that I learn these meaningless sounds: *astrogation, can't keep altitude, no landing spots in the lowlands, and alien-landscape?* They are a bane to my existence, and they keep me from my chores.

But it is part of the message.

The rains have stopped for a week now. Our people knelt in prayer and gave thanks for the abundance that once again had poured from the sky.

I step into the desert and pray that I have strength to continue the trek. My stomach hurts from passing the food back up, but Mother encourages me. "Another few days, and you will not mind the pain," she says. "If you are to windance, you cannot gain any more weight."

I wipe spittle from my chin, the taste of vomit still in my mouth. I nod and try to be brave, for I know she is right. But even with that knowledge, I still cannot make the pain go away.

To eat, to fill my stomach so that I do not grow too weak—these are the last days. I must retch most of the meager food back up so that I will remain thin, light enough not to fall when the wind lifts me. I sip water and try not to think of the foul taste in my throat.

The men are ahead of us, ferrying water in bulging waterskins so that even the weakest of us may survive. Father is somewhere there among them. I have not seen him since the end of the rainfall, but that is part of the *way*. It would not do to have the men distracted. Grandmother still speaks of the time when she was a little girl and we numbered thousands of people. But that first year they lazed, took their time crossing the great plateau and missed the rain on the opposite side. And without the extra water, the three-month journey killed most of our people. Never again will we make that mistake—this is taught even to the children.

Once we are on our way, we cannot afford to dawdle. Only one stop is allowed, for it marks the middle of our journey back to the great cliff. And that is the time of teaching. The time for those who are old enough to be shown the true reason for the windance, and why a womanchild must desperately try to deliver the message.

Night, and the distant point of light races across the sky. I draw in a breath. *Those who stayed behind.*

I close my eyes, try to sleep and dream of joining them. . . .

"Be careful, child!" Mother's voice rings sharply throughout the enclosure.

I stop and hold still, hardly daring to breathe. I remember when Mother last raised her voice—that was for me not to get so close to the cliff. Now, almost as an afterthought, the scolding is tempered by her tired voice.

"Your time will come . . . too soon."

As I wait for Mother to approach, I peer through the

darkness. Tiny streaks of light from the opening behind me reflect off the walls.

Long ropes dangle from the ceiling—but they are too fine, too strong and too strangely smooth to be rope. They are hollow inside and are almost like human hair. Grandmother said that our ancestors used to speak through these wires, direct their machines to do mysterious things. All of this happened before the crash.

Fallen boxes, weirdly hard chairs and a jumble of strange items clutter the floor. Musty smells roll through my nose. It seems as if a giant had swaggered through and dumped everything on its side. It looks worse than the time our tent blew down in last year's storm.

I hear Mother's words, the same words she says when we come to the Ship, every time we make the great walk between rains: "Remember your past. Remember the pain, the trials that our people go through, so we can survive."

Mother approaches, holding Namora by the hand. They wind through the debris, stepping carefully. My sister does not speak. It is her first time inside.

Mother hesitates, as if something bothers her. Her voice is a whisper; I strain to hear what she says to Namora. "In the heavens we lived without fear, without fighting the windy desert. Life was better then. Your grandmother's mother did not have to cross the great plateau as we do now. Before the crash, before the great treks, and even before we knew what this plateau was like with its waterless curse, our people dreamed of a new world. For ages they traveled on the Ship, in hope, longing for the new life that their children would live. They who had the dream had never experienced the wide, open sky. . . ." She grows quiet. "That is why they decided to chance the landing on this great highland, and not the rocky lowlands below."

Her voice cracks, making the interior of the Ship echo as if it were still filled with the dead ones. The time she spends with me, her words, stay in my mind like the dainty compressed desert flowers that Namora keeps in her pouch.

I step forward, into the dark cavern. I reach out and place a hand on the hard smooth surface to guide my way. It seems to take forever, to step over the wreckage and fallen equipment. Ever so often I smell the new life that is trying to get a foothold in this place they call the Ship. But whenever I can see the growth, it is pitifully small.

I reach a sharp corner and stop. "Mother?"

She brushes past me. Her voice is strained, a carefully controlled excitement that betrays the fact that we have finally reached our destination, deep inside.

"Pay attention, child," she cautions Namora. She weaves her way through the darkness.

I strain to see where she is going. Her shape is nothing more than a faint blob in the darkness, but yet in my trust, I follow her.

I tap my foot around until I find it . . . *there*, I find where Mother has stepped. The pain in my stomach lessens; my Mother has never been wrong. Slowly, my sight is coming back in the darkness.



And then I see it—  
Old, yellow leaves—*papers*, Grandmother calls them—drift to the floor as I approach. The delicate sheets seem to be made of tattered spidersilk.

Mother draws Namora near. The only sound in the old metallic hull is that of sister's feet, shuffling across the dust that had not been disturbed since last visit. The smell brings ancient memories alive.

Mother speaks. The last three years come back to me, the memory of what she is about to say.

"Those that stayed behind in the heavens could not help. They had no way to know what had befallen us. Somewhere in here are things called *radio . . . teleceiver . . .* the ancient way to speak to the heavens." Mother looks around the room and says softly, "They mean nothing now."

Mother sweeps a hand around the darkened room. "Hope is what keeps us alive, and this is what we must never forget. We know they are waiting—sometimes we see them at night, racing across the sky. Someday, a messenger will rise and let those who stayed there know what has befallen us. And they will descend to take us back up."

Namora's eye are wide. She looks at me. She does not fully understand why we must journey across the plateau, ever following the rain; or that twice a year, when we arrive at the great cliff, we have the chance to send a messenger aloft. . . .

I listen, but I cannot hear my Mother's voice as she continues with the legend. For some reason, things do not make any sense to me. I see my Mother, all of the twenty years of her existence, kneeling and holding Namora tight. Not caring that her knees are flayed, bleeding from being scraped against the metallic floor, as she recites the words to my younger sister.

Her words roll over me. Tears start to stream down my face. *Hope*. I don't know why, but I have the sick feeling that it doesn't matter if I succeed, but only that I *try*. . . .

A hand touches my shoulder. Grandmother arrives and leads me away. Strands from the roof brush my hair, and I nearly trip as we leave. When we emerge from the darkness, sunlight reflects off the cylindrical shell. Red light diffuses around, basking the ground and people in a soft glow. Wind drives the mustiness of the Ship away.

Grandmother squats in front of me. She takes my hand. "We are so proud of you. No one in our family has been so thin, born for the dance." She reaches up and brushes back my tangled hair. "But now, you are our hope." She smiles at me, her eyes searching my face.

I turn away and study the deep gash in the desert that leads to the Ship. The chasm extends into the barren desert as far as I can see.

Children run along the ridge, laughing. I long to be with them . . . but the image of another Ship descending, coming down from the heavens to take us away, nearly overwhelms me. I see a vision of my people rising, going back to paradise.

I do not understand why I feel this way, so mixed up. I should be filled with joy at the chance, the opportunity to take the message. *If only there could be another way. . . .*

Mother and Namora emerge from the Ship. Little sister rubs her eyes in the sunlight. Mother comes and holds me, as if she knows the fears that I have. The hesitancy, and the doubts that keep boiling to the top of my mind.

There can be no other way. Mother has always been right.

As if the wind knows what I am thinking, fine grains of sand blow into my face. I bend and close my eyes as we walk, trying to keep out the stinging particles. Mother pulls me along, into the biting wind.

Soon, we are far from the Ship and the metallic smell is gone. Only the sky and sand surround us once again. And like the unbroken desert, nothing remains in my mind except my mother's words. And the pain in my stomach . . . that I think is only from not eating.

Many weeks have passed since we left the ship. I pray we will soon reach the cliff. Someone says that she can smell the humid air whipped up from the cliffside. I do not believe her, but the wind is blowing stronger now, sometimes warmer.

The desert air is cold. No water falls among us, and what is left from the rainfall two months ago is nearly gone.

I follow Grandmother. Mother carries Namora, holding her tight against the wind. We stumble forward in a line, each tied to the person in front of us. The dust obscures my vision and the cold saps my strength. I pray again with each step I take. If we do not reach the cliff soon, we may not survive.

One step after another. I try not to think of the dance and instead remember the times I have spent on the steppes: my little sister, laughing with my mother, and even the rare times I have spent with my father as he skinned the fur off a *rabisch* creature. With every step I know that the time is growing near.

I put down my head and turn into the wind—"The cliff! The cliff!" someone ahead cries out. The voice barely comes over the wind's howl.

Grandmother turns to me. "Quickly!" She tugs on the line and pulls me forward. Namora starts to cry. I cough from the sand.

A voice comes over the wind. "We are there!"

Each step feels like it is my last. Every time I put my foot down, it seems as if I am battling against a force pushing me backwards, telling me not to go on. Yet I strain and make myself go, because I . . . have to.

My eyes sting—not from the wind that drives dust against my face, but from knowing that it is too easy to say no. It is too easy not to step out and dance.

I watch my mother ahead of me as she carries Namora. Little sister swirls in and out of sight with the dust. I stop. I know that it will be just as easy for Namora to go the way that I have gone, and prepare for the windance if I fail.

Unless I succeed, I know that my people will be



cursed to forever cross the highlands in search of water. And always depending on one of their young girls to dance the wind.

The men appear out of the dust ahead. Someone picks me up and carries me. They wrap me in a bright yellow cloth. I start to cry.

Mother holds my hand tightly. I take a deep breath and try not to show that I am afraid. I look straight ahead. Behind me stands Namora with the rest of my people; in front of me is the cliff.

The priests call out, their lips chanting the ancient litany. Their voices are carried away with the wind.

Mother's lips brush against my ear. "You do not have to dance. I . . . I feel so ashamed that Grandmother and I could not, that our bones were too large, if only to keep you from this."

I start to turn to her, but I know that if I do, I will not turn back. There is nothing I can do. Mother has given

me an out, said that it is all right to back down. And I know that I would not be ostracized for it.

But the knowledge that my people would continue in this relentless crossing makes me feel sicker than I ever was in regurgitating my food. There is no choice—even though they say there is.

I finally look behind me. My last glance is not of the yellow and red flowing robes, nor of the people, engulfed in dust, that I see. It is of Namora, and the hope she shows that I will succeed.

Turning, I look straight ahead. The cliff plummets two miles straight down in front of me. A river at the bottom winds to the horizon through unbroken rocky fields. The sky is blue, cloudless. Wind whips around my head, blowing dirt and dust into my face.

I push back my hair, but the strands keep flying round. I try to keep my lip from quivering. . . .

I step out and feel the wind sweep around me, as it carries me up. ♦

## About the Authors

If you're reading this magazine from front to back, then you've just seen the latest story from **Doug Beason**. Or, if you haven't read "Windance" yet, back up a few pages and do it now. We think it's a moving piece of writing—and, as we told Doug when we bought the story, it ends at *exactly* the right point.

The story is Doug's fourth appearance in this magazine, but only his second solo effort (following "The Man I'll Never Be," May 1987, which was also his first professional sale). He has sold us two other short stories in collaboration with Kevin J. Anderson, the more recent one being "Prisons" (April 1992), and the third Anderson-Beason collaborative novel, *Assemblers of Infinity*, will be released in February.

"Mama Told Me Not to Come," the next story in line, is the sort of *tour de force* that **Paul Di Filippo** pulls off so well. We used to think that his previous story for us, "Lennon Spex" (July 1992), would be a tough act to follow . . . but that's what we get for underestimating Paul's ability to make the absurd seem normal. As a special bonus, this story once and for all addresses the question of how the dinosaurs disappeared. Yes, it's absurd—and at the same time, it makes perfect sense.

It's been four issues since we used a story by **Phil Jennings**—and what makes that remarkable is the fact that it's the longest gap between two AMAZING® Stories appearances for Phil in almost two and a half years. "Mad Maud's Dance" is his ninth contribution to the full-sized version of the magazine and his seventeenth story overall, dating back to "The Castaway" in the March 1987 issue.

**John W. Randal** is the first of three writers making their AMAZING Stories debuts in this issue. "Proxy" was John's tenth sale, including a couple of pieces in *Aboriginal SF* and a story in the sixth *Writers of the Future* anthology.

The last time **Greg Stewart** forced us to break our "no poetry" rule, the story-in-verse-form he sent us ended up earning a spot on the Nebula Awards ballot for Best Short Story. Now we're breaking the rule again, for an equally good reason: "Goldilocks and the Virtual Bears," a charmingly bizarre little tale in which everyone lives happily ever after . . . except possibly your Uncle Louie.

**Joyce K. Jensen** is the second newcomer to these pages, and "Merging Forever with the Dolowei" is her second appearance in a professional

genre magazine; she also has a story upcoming in *RESF*. Joyce says that her fiction "seems to be obsessed with notions of memory and how memories affect us," and she's also vitally interested in the subject of parenting. It's easy to see how both of those influences found their way into this piece of work.

Rounding out our trio of first-timers is **Mike Kallenberger**, for whom "Faces in the Sky" is published story number three. Mike reports that in his non-writing life, he works in Milwaukee "doing consumer research for a company whose product is widely associated with Milwaukee—something to do with hops and barley. . . ."

As a columnist, **Robert Silverberg** has written for every issue of this magazine for the last eleven and a half years. As a storyteller, his appearances during that same period have been much more infrequent than we would have liked. But when he does show us a piece of fiction, it's always a winner. The novella in this issue is excerpted from his new book *Kingdoms of the Wall*, which will be published in February . . . so you don't have to wait too long to find out what happens to Poilar and his fellow pilgrims. ♦

# Mama Told Me Not to Come



Paul Di Filippo

"Aren't you having *fun* yet, Loren?"

I lifted my head slowly. It felt like it belonged to someone else. Some sadomasochist who had stuffed it with sand, used the tongue for a doormat and the eyesockets for a photo-bath, then left the whole mess out in a cold autumn rain.

Ann Marie, my hostess, towered over me, glass in hand. The numerous drinks she had consumed that night had done little to mute her incorrigible perkiness.

"Do I look like I'm having 'fun' yet, Ann Marie?"

I was sitting on the floor in a corner of Ann Marie's living room, clasping my upraised knees. I was wearing the same stained suit I had worn for the past week, twenty-four hours a day. My hair resembled a haystack pitched by one of the less competent Snopeses. The

Illustration by Jill Bauman

stubble on my face was patched with dried mustard from a steady diet of cart-vendor hot dogs.

All around me swirled and bubbled, perked and pooled, churned and chortled, shrieked and shouted, guffawed and gasped, tinkled and crashed that strange human activity known as—a party.

A party I was in no way a party to.

Ann Marie tried to focus her chipmunk-bright gaze on me, and, after womanful concentration, succeeded.

"Hmmm, well, now that you mention it, Loren, I *have* seen you look happier, not to mention more smartly dressed. . . ."

From a far-off room came the noise of breaking glass, followed by yelps, cheers and what sounded like curtains being ripped off their rods.

"Ann Marie," I said wearily, "don't you think you'd better see what's going on with your other guests? It sounds like they're demolishing your lovely apartment. . . ."

I believe it was one of the more feeble-minded kings of England of whom it was said: "Be careful what idea you put into the King's head, for once inserted it is nigh impossible to dislodge." Ann Marie, especially after a certain amount of booze, was similarly single-minded. And now I was the sole object of her concern.

"Oh, I'm not worried about *anything*," she said blithely. "I bought special party insurance just for tonight. After all, it's not every day you get the chance to welcome in a new century."

"An astute and unarguable observation, Ann Marie."

"You see, I don't care what anyone does tonight, as long as they're having *fun*! And that's why I'm worried about you. You're obviously not having *fun*!"

"Fun" was a concept I could no longer wrap my mind around. It seemed to me now in my despair that I had never understood the word. I doubted anyone really did. All I wanted was to be left alone until midnight. Locking eyes with Ann Marie, I tried to communicate this.

"Ann Marie, do you know why I came to your party tonight?"

"Why, to have *fun* with your *friends*, of course. . . ."

"No, Ann Marie. Although that might have been true at one time, it is unfortunately not so now. I came, Ann Marie, simply because you live on the forty-ninth floor."

A look of absolute bewilderment instantly transformed Ann Marie's face, as if she were one of those dolls with a button in their backs that swapped their expressions.

"It is a *nice* view of the city, Loren, but you've seen it a *hundred* times before. . . ."

"Tonight, Ann Marie, I intend to see it 'up close and personal,' you might say. At midnight, when everyone else is celebrating the beginning of a glorious new century, I am going to open your sliding glass door—assuming none of these 'party animals' has broken it before then, in which case I shall simply step through the shard-filled frame—and emerge onto that small square of unadorned concrete you insist on calling a 'patio,' from the railing of which I shall instantly hurl myself into space, thus ending my complete and utter misery."

Someone twisted the button in Ann Marie's back, dialing up an expression of shocked disgust.

"Do you have any *idea*, Loren, of what a *bummer* that would be for everyone who's trying to *enjoy* themselves?"

"I am not too keen on the notion myself, Ann Marie. But it seems like the only thing left for me to do."

Ann Marie dropped into a squat beside me, sloshing some of her drink on my pants leg in the process. Not that it mattered.

"Tell ol' Annie all about it, Loren. What's wrong?"

"It's quite simple. Precisely one week ago, my whole life fell apart like a dollar wristwatch. In the space of a single hour, Jenny left me and I lost my job."

"I wondered why she wasn't with you. What happened?"

"I still don't know. I got home and found a note. It said that she was flying to El Ay with someone named Reynaldo."

"Ub-oh."

"You *knew* about Reynaldo?"

"She *swore* it was just a *fling*. . . ."

I dropped my head into my hands and moaned.

"There, there, Loren," said Ann Marie, patting my shoulder. "She was never good enough for you."

"But I still love her, damn it!"

"You'll find someone else, I'm sure. Once you get yourself looking respectable again. Why, the new love of your life could even be here tonight! And I'm sure you'll land another job."

My laugh must have been awfully loud and eerie, to cause everyone in the immediate vicinity to look at me as they did. Even Ann Marie appeared shocked, and she knew what I was feeling.

"Don't tell me—" she began.

I feared I was shouting, but I couldn't help it. "Yes! I've been replaced by an expert system! A thousand-dollar software package has taken my place! Six years of higher education down the fucking tubes! There's nothing left for me but a government retraining camp. . . ."

"I hear the meals are *great*. . . ." said Ann Marie halfheartedly.

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet. Seven nights of sleeping on park benches and steam gratings had taken their toll. "I don't care if they serve stuffed fucking pheasant! I'm going to kill myself! Do you all hear me? I'm going to take the big dive! Tickets on sale now!"

"Loren, *please*! People are trying to start the new millennium off with a cheerful *attitude*!"

All the spirit went out of me. To say I felt like a sack full of shit would have been to err on the side of cheerfulness. I felt like an *empty* sack that had *once* held shit. "Okay, Ann Marie, you win. I'll be a good boy. Until the clock strikes twelve. And then I'm going to make like a crippled pigeon."

Ann Marie's natural idiot exuberance reasserted itself. "That's *wonderful*, Loren. I'm sure something will make you change your mind before you do anything *rash*. Now, let me see. First you need a little *drink*. Then, we'll introduce you to someone exciting. Who would you like to talk to?"

"No one."

"Oh, don't be a *poop!* I know! There's this real character that Sam brought with him. The guy claims to be a Greek *god* of some sort. Imagine! Now, *he'll* make you forget about your teeny-weensy *troubles*."

"Is he Charon? That's the only one I feel like meeting."

"Sharon? I told you, he's a *guy!* Now, c'mon."

I let Ann Marie lead me away.

I didn't have anything planned for an hour yet.

All around us the party was accelerating like a piano dropped from a penthouse suite, promising as spectacularly clangorous a finale.

Five people were monopolizing the middle of the living room with a game of Co-ed Naked Twister. A bottle of baby oil seemed to be involved. Their audience was the people sitting three-deep on the couch, seemingly oblivious of the fact that one of the cushions appeared to be smoldering. In the corner diagonally opposite the one I had been occupying, there was a knot of bodies around what appeared to be a burbling hookah. A crowd was gathered in front of the flatscreen HDTV, playing a drinking game: every time the septuagenarian Dick Clark said "Rockin' in the millennium," whoever failed to shout "Let's party like it's Ninetenn-ninety-nine!" had to chug from a fifth of peppermint schnapps. What appeared at first to be a diapered child draped with a New Year banner was drawing with crayons on the wall. Upon closer inspection, I saw he was a dwarf, and his drawing elegantly obscene. From the next room a DAT player blared over the sound of projectile vomiting, and I could feel dancers shaking the floor. The whole building, in fact, seemed to be quaking. None of this, however, managed to wake the mousey woman who had gone to sleep six feet off the floor atop a narrow bookshelf.

I had never understood parties. Overheated or freezing, ear-splitting or dead silent, boring or overstimulating, crowded or sparsely attended, too much food or too little, liquor-saturated or temperance-bound, they always inhabited one extreme or another. Never had I been to a party that was just plain enjoyable, in a moderate way. It was possible none such existed. Certainly, Ann Marie's end-of-the-century bash was not one.

"Just think," said Ann Marie herself, as she steered me around a recumbent body wrapped like a fashionable mummy in the curtains I had earlier heard being misappropriated, "there must be a *zillion* parties just like this one going on around the world tonight!"

"What an appalling notion."

"*Poop!* Gee whillikers, where is that Greek guy?"

We entered the kitchen just in time to be nearly dualy decapitated by a colorful flying plate, which crashed and shattered against the wall alongside the door.

"You bitch!"

"Bastard!"

Ann Marie intervened. "Jules and Melissa, I'm so *hurt!* That was a piece of original *Fiestaware!*"

"Sorry, Ann Marie. But he deserved it. I caught him with that slut Oona in the *bathroom!*"

"She only asked me to help her zip her dress. . . ."

"And what is he doing unzipped in the first place, may I ask?"

"Now, now," said Ann Marie, "why don't you two kiss and make up? You don't want to start the next thousand years off with a silly ol' *spat*, do you?"

Convinced that she had done all she could to effect a reconciliation, Ann Marie turned away from the glowering couple. Spotting a jug of Smirnoff's on the counter, she snatched it up. Setting her own drink down next to an unclaimed lipstick-smeared glass, she splashed a few inches of vodka for herself and me.

"Here you go! Now, if only—oh, there he is!" She dragged me over to a man sitting alone on a countertop.

If you took a composite of Keith Richards at the nadir of his heroin addiction and Charles Bukowski on a six-month bender and started to morph his body into that of Miles Davis just before he died, but stopped with the transformation half complete, you might end up with someone who looked like this guy. He was dressed in sandals and an outfit that resembled blue satin pajamas, and he was eating from a bunch of grapes with languid disdain. "Dissipated" was the most charitable word whose dictionary entry he might illustrate.

Ann Marie accosted him with, "Hell-*lo!* I'd like you to meet someone. This is Loren. Loren, meet . . . oh, I've forgotten your name!"

Chewing a grape with enervated precision, the man said, "Bacchus."

I could almost hear the wind the allusion made, passing over Ann Marie's head. "Well, Mister Bacchus, you and Loren have a nice talk. I've got to go *mingle*."

Ann Marie left. A pool of silence seemed to surround "Bacchus" and me, strangely isolating us. I tried to think of something to say, and some reason to say it. The habits of sociability die hard. Finally, I opted for easy sarcasm.

"What happened to the figure, man? Aren't you supposed to be carrying a few more pounds? And what about the ivy wreath? Couldn't get to the florist's tonight? Wait a minute, let me guess. Al-anon, World Gym, Ralph Lauren, and you're a new man."

I knocked back my drink, watching him out of the bottom of my eyes, waiting for his reaction to the needling.

Bacchus finished chewing, regarding me with neither overt hostility nor friendliness. When he had extracted the last atom of taste from the fruit, he spoke.

"You from fucking Disney, or what?"

It took me a few seconds to get it. Then I burst out laughing.

"Yeah," continued Bacchus. "I came *that* close to slapping them with a suit when that fucking cartoon came out. Made me look like a real asshole. The cute donkey, the pratfalls, scared of *lightning*, for Hera's sake, as if Zeus and I weren't tight as your mama's twat. But then I figured an out-of-court settlement would be best. I still get thirty percent on every tape sale."

"That's cool," I said, taking one of his grapes and flicking it across the room. "Keeps you in produce." The vodka had gone through my empty stomach and straight to my head. Suddenly, it seemed good to be drunk, for what I still intended to do. I made a move toward the Smirnoff's for a refill, but Bacchus stopped me.

"Here, let me."  
I stuck my glass out, not knowing what to expect, and he held his right palm over it. Wine gurgled out, as if from a vinous stigmata.

I pretended not to be astonished. "Hose up the sleeve?"  
Bacchus shrugged. "If you wish."  
I tasted the wine. Cool breezes on a green hillside, ocean spray and hot sunlight, a shaded stream under ancient oaks. That was the vintage.

My head was light as a Wordsworthian cloud. Bacchus's voice seemed to come from a neighboring solar system.

"You know, you can call them anything you want. Parties, revels, carnivals, orgies, saturnalia, mardi gras—Hades! Call 'em Bacchanalia, if I can toot my own horn. But all festivities have a certain logic. I could write a fucking book on the dynamics of fun. And one chapter would be all about cases like you."

I sipped more of the incredible wine. "And what exactly am I?"

"The specter at the feast. The suicide. Hanged man and fool."

I tried not to shiver. "What if I am? You gonna try to talk me out of my plans?"

Bacchus held both hands up, palms out. I couldn't see any tubes—or holes, for that matter.

"By no means. I just offer my Olympian perceptions, for what they're worth."

I was suddenly sick of talking. Sick of living. Midnight was fifteen minutes away, and I just wanted everything over with.

"Don't you have someplace else to go?" I said.  
Bacchus laughed. "I am everywhere already."  
I was turning away, but that stopped me. "Huh?"  
Leaning forward as if to confide a secret, the strange man said, "Every party that ever was or is or will be is *connected*. Same with every war or every fuck. Or so Mars and Venus tell me. You just have to know how to get from one to another."

"And how would you do such a thing?"  
"In my case, I am simply *called*, manifesting simultaneously, everywhere at once. Gods are like that. You see, I am the original party vibe, a permanent, omnipresent wavefront that collapses into physicality wherever conditions are right. But if you wanted to try it, you'd need some props."

"Props?"  
Bacchus skinned back the sleeve on his right arm. The veins in his wrist were not blue, but royal purple, and there was definitely no tube down his clothing. He held up his empty hand in an affected magician's pose.

I never looked away, but somehow, with a mere twitch, he summoned up an object.

It was a paper-and-plastic party horn, with trailing cellophane streamers around the bell.

"One blast on this, and you're instantly elsewhere, dispersed randomly along the party matrix."

"Randomly?"  
Another shrug. "Nature of the beast. Some drunken scientist named Heisenberg tried explaining it to me once,

but I didn't dig it. Stochastic, probabilistic, chaotic—made less sense than Socrates. Oh, I should mention something else. Wherever you find yourself, you're limited to the psychophysical boundaries of the party. Whatever gathering you pop up in, you can't just step out of it into, say, Armistice Day New York."

"How come?"  
"Outside the special party environment, you'd be a temporal-spatial intruder. Your unnatural presence would cause the instant conversion of your whole mass to energy. Make Hiroshima look like a firecracker."

"Forget it," I said. "Not interested."  
Bacchus tucked the horn in my jacket pocket. "You never know."

Despite myself, I found myself saying, "You mentioned 'props,' plural. . . ."

Bacchus grinned, and twitched his hand again. A polka-dotted conical party hat appeared. Before I could stop him, he had placed it on my head, snapping the rubber string maliciously under my chin.

"Lets you speak and understand all languages. And then there's this." He materialized a Ziploc bag full of multicolored confetti. "Sprinkle a little of this on someone, and they'll accompany you when you blow the horn." He dropped the confetti into my other pocket. "Now, you'd better get going. It's almost midnight."

So saying, Bacchus spun me around and booted me in the rump.

I went down to my knees.  
And when I picked myself up, he was gone, as if he had never been.

But I was still wearing the party hat, and my hands found the other "props" in my pockets.

Screw all his bullshit! Nothing in my pitiful life had changed.

I made for the patio door.  
None of Ann Marie's jabbering or insensate guests tried to stop me, and Ann Marie herself was nowhere to be seen.

As was only natural, considering the chill and darkness, the small balcony was empty.

I shut the glass door behind me, a barrier to all warmth and human noise.

The narrow, flat railing was bitter cold beneath my hands as I clambered atop it.

Below me the city spread out like a Tiffany show window. Wind plucked at my sleeves, beckoning. My eyes began to tear.

I leaned forward, then hesitated. Was this really my only out . . . ?

Hands in my back shoved me over.  
"See you later!" I heard Bacchus yell.

I fell about twelve stories before I got the horn out and up to my lips.

I closed my eyes and blew like Gabriel, releasing a long *son BLAT!*

The tremendous passage of the icy wind past my plummeting body stopped. All sense of falling ceased.

I seemed to be sitting in a large comfortable padded armchair. The noise of rattling crockery dancing on a

wooden tabletop came to my ears. Someone was huffing and puffing. Another someone was grunting. A third someone was squeaking. Then the grunting someone spoke. Shouted, rather, in a high-pitched unhuman voice.

"Put some butter 'round his ears!"

I opened my eyes.

A large tree overspread the tea-party-bedecked table, casting an emerald umbrage. I could smell growing grass and warm scones. The Mad Hatter held the Dormouse by his ankles, while the March Hare pushed on the pitiful rodent's shoulders, trying to cram him into a teapot. Alice, of course, had just left.

Abandoning his efforts, the Mad Hatter lowered the Dormouse's legs to the table, and the Dormouse lay there with his head in the pot, his squeaks gradually subsiding, to be replaced by snores.

The Mad Hatter removed his topper and scratched his sparsely haired scalp. I could see the dark line of sweat around his hatband. "Put some butter 'round his ears? Why, whatever for? We're not going to eat him, are we?"

The March Hare wrinkled his nose in disgust, quivering his whiskers. "Dolt! Naturally not. You can only eat Dormice in months that end with an 'O,' and this is May!"

Restoring his hat to his head, the Mad Hatter said, "As I recall, you were the one who formerly advised me to add some butter to the works of my watch, and we all know how that turned out. Why should this time be any different?"

"You must admit, the time your watch keeps with butter in the works is much different from the time it kept before."

The Mad Hatter removed his watch from his pocket and gazed dolefully at it, before soaking it in his teacup. "True, quite true. Although it's still right twice a day, the days seem so much longer!"

"I only suggested the butter this time," stipulated the March Hare, "with an eye toward slipperiness."

"You said, 'ears,' not 'eye.' It was the Dormouse's ears that needed buttering, you claimed. I recall it quite distinctly, for it gave me such a disturbing pause as I never experienced before, nor ever hope to again."

The March Hare grew huffy. "I said no such thing! I merely claimed that our somnambulant friend had gotten some butter in his eye, and it needed wiping."

"What a fib!"

"God's truth!"

"Fib!"

"Truth!"

From inside the teapot came a muffled voice. "Why not ask the gentleman wearing the dunce cap to settle the matter?"

The March Hare and the Mad Hatter both turned toward me.

I tried to shrink into the chair, but there was no DRINK ME bottle handy.

What in sweet Jesus's name had I gotten myself into? Goddamn that Bacchus!

"What a capital idea!" exclaimed the Mad Hatter.

"That's no more impartial than someone who has no idea of what's going on!"

Squinting one eye at me, the March Hare said, "I question his qualifications. He looks as if he's searching for something. How can a man with a mission possibly help us?"

"We already tried a miss with a mansion, and she was utterly useless."

The March Hare clapped his paws together. "That's it! He's looking for Alice!"

The Dormouse, with one paw on the pottery spout and one on the handle, succeeded in removing the teapot from his head. "I think not. He's merely looking for a lass. . . ."

"Oh, well, in that case, there's always the Queen."

"Or the Duchess," added the March Hare. "Neither one is married."

"What of the King?"

"The King has nothing to do with the Duchess. That's merely a nasty rumor started by the Knave."

"The King wouldn't object, then, if this fellow wished to marry the Queen?"

"Why should he? A husband has to do whatever his wife wants, especially if he's as powerful as the King."

"Then it's agreed? Our friend with the sugarloaf cap is to marry the Queen today?"

"By all means."

"Excelsior!"

Joining hands, the Hare and Hatter began to dance and sing.

"We're going to a wedding!"

"It shall be very gay!"

"We'll save the groom's beheading

"For another summer day!"

Meanwhile, the Dormouse had walked across the table and stepped down into my lap. Involuntarily, I flinched away from his furry weight. But, restraining myself, I allowed him to curl up and go to sleep.

I didn't dare do anything in this hallucination. There was no telling how I might make it worse. In any case, I fully expected to impact the pavement below Ann Marie's apartment any second now, once this Ambrose-Bierce moment of frenzied delusional brain activity was over.

Finishing their capers, the two strange creatures arranged themselves on either side of me.

"Have some wine?" asked the March Hare.

"Thanks, but I've had enough. Would you answer ~~a~~ question for me, though?"

"Only if you ask one."

"Assuming that what Bacchus told me was true, how is it that I've ended up in a fictional party instead of a real one?"

"Fictional? Who says we're fictional? That's a tall story someone's shortchanged you with! Here, does this feel fictional?"

The March Hare inclined his head and made me stroke one long, plush ear.

"No," I was forced to admit, "it doesn't. . . ."

"And what of poor Dormouse? If he were fictional, as you fictitiously maintain, would it be possible for him to



eat that confetti in your pocket, as he is now so raply doating?"

I looked down, alarmed. Although his eyes were still closed, the Dormouse had somehow burrowed into my pocket, gnawed a hole in the Ziploc of transport-confetti, and was now chewing a mouthful.

"Hey!" I shot to my feet, dumping the Dormouse onto the ground. He lay on his back, still somnolently chewing.

Suddenly, my arms were pinioned with surprising strength by the Mad Hatter.

"That's no way to treat someone you've just poisoned!"

"Off with his head!"

The Queen and all her court had arrived. I was somehow gratified to see that their playing-card bodies had a narrow third dimension to them. It made the whole thing so much more plausible.

The masked executioner advanced on me. He held not an axe, but a butter knife he had appropriated from the table.

"I'm so sorry we shan't be getting married now," said the Queen. "But I can't possibly marry a murderer unless he's paid for his crimes by dying."

I felt the blade of the knife laid against my throat.

Jerking violently forward, I tossed the Mad Hatter over my shoulders. He flew among the playing-card figures, flattening a swath through their ranks.

I found Bacchus's horn and brought it to my lips.

I heard the March Hare exclaim, "How splendid! A fanfare for his own throat-slitting—"

And then I was gone.

By the light of two flaring cressets that cast back the night, I saw that there was a sign over the door of the marble mansion that read:

ANY SLAVE LEAVING THE HOUSE WITHOUT HIS MASTER'S  
PERMISSION WILL RECEIVE ONE HUNDRED LASHES

"Ah, Latin," said a drowsy voice from the vicinity of my knees. "How I wish I could read that marvelous language! Unfortunately, during my school days I developed the habit of dropping off to sleep whenever the Master began to declaim Caesar. Even now, the simplest 'weenie-weenie-winkle' sends me to the Land of Nod straight away."

I looked down. Standing on his hind legs, the Dormouse began to lick a paw and drag it over one rounded, unbuttered ear.

I couldn't believe my eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, grooming myself. I'm positively slathered with soggy tea leaves! I'm terribly sorry if I've offended you. Is it considered ill-mannered to groom oneself in public where you come from?"

Obviously, Bacchus's transport-confetti worked as advertised. I had been hoping to leave all traces of the Mad Tea Party far behind me. Plainly, however, the Dormouse and I were now permanently linked.

"Where's the Latin?" I asked.

"Why, on the sign, of course."

"That's English."

"I beg your pardon. *I'm* English, and I like to fancy

I'd recognize a compatriot if I chanced on one. No, that's Latin, or I'm not a member of the *Gliridae*."

Stretching its string, I lifted the party hat without removing it.

The sign was Latin.

I snapped the hat back.

The sign was English.

"Well, I'll be damned. . . ."

Suddenly, my awful fate dawned on me in its full magnitude. Any lingering drunkenness in my veins burned off faster than gunpowder, and I felt an immense weight bow me down.

I was damned.

Never would I see my home era again, except perhaps in passing. The random path through time and space of my horn-assisted materializations ensured that. And the temporary nature of the parties I was now forced to inhabit demanded that I perform frequent disorienting transitions. How long did the average revel last? Eight hours? A day, tops? I suspected that for me to linger beyond a party's natural end would be as fatal as attempting to step outside it while it was in progress. No, at the first hint of a party's imminent breakup, the first "It's getting late, we must be going, thanks, it's been great fun," I'd have to sound my trumpet and disappear.

I hated parties! And now I was doomed to spend the rest of my unnatural existence attending them, a Flying Dutchman of the social circuit. I had traded a quick and relatively painless—albeit messy—death for a lifetime of canapes and cocktails, tiny toothpick-pierced hot dogs and mindless chatter, loutish frat brawls and stuffy White House dinners, gallery openings and bar mitzvahs.

Almost, I turned and ran. How painful could it be to become an instant nova?

Voices approaching down the street stopped me. I had forgotten the existence of other people. My fiery demise would surely wipe out thousands of innocents. While I was quite content to go, I had no desire to exit as a mass murderer.

Damn that Bacchus!

"Oh," yawned the Dormouse, "all this Latin is good as a rum toddy for scattering sand in one's eyes."

Somehow, the Dormouse suddenly seemed like a familiar comforting presence in the face of these unknown people arriving, and I wanted him awake.

"No, don't go to sleep now!"

"I'm . . . afraid . . . I can't . . . help . . ."

Curling into a ball, the Dormouse filled the air with rodential snores.

Hastily, I picked him up and stepped back into the shadows, praying I wouldn't move beyond the party's invisible sphere.

For good or ill, I didn't explode.

The noisy visitors stepped onto the mansion's wide, columned porch.

They were all dressed in splendid colored belted togas, save the slaves, whose clothing was drabber and more uniform. The citizens among them had obviously been drinking for some time, and were plainly several trime-sheets to the wind.

A large man resembling Zero Mostel said loudly, "Ah, Trimalchio! You're a rich and ignorant ex-slave with no more grace than a camelopard, but we'll drink your Falernian anyway!"

"Hush, Glyco, our host will hear you!" advised an elderly woman wearing too much makeup for any era.

"What do I care! I'd say it right to his pocked face!"

"Still, for my sake . . ."

"All right, all right!"

Now a young woman, seemingly unaccompanied, spoke.

"The rest of you may as well go inside. I have a last detail to attend to."

Glyco laughed. "Fitting a new pessary up your lovely quim, I daresay! The work of one of Priapus's priestesses is never done!"

Even the object of Glyco's crude jest joined in the raucous laughter, though there was an undertone of distaste in her chuckles. She swatted him with a bundle of herbs she carried and said, "Quartilla excuses your impious jest, Glyco. But I cannot swear that my god is as forgiving. Priapus does not take kindly such insults."

Glyco immediately paled. "Please, Quartilla, I meant no offense! Would—would a small donation of one hundred sesterces to the temple perhaps serve to amend . . . ?"

"Two hundred is more likely to soothe the Olympian ire."

"Very well," grumbled Glyco. "I'll send a slave by in the morning."

A hulking man wearing a sword began to bang on the door. He was as ugly as ditchwater and as scarred as the carving tree at your local lover's lane. Drink had transformed what I could sense was innate belligerence into eager malevolence.

"Open up, for Achilles' sake! Hermeros, the life of the party, is here!"

The door swung open, and a wizened porter in green livery was framed. "No need to shout, citizens, the meal's only just commenced. Come in, quickly now, before the night air gives me my death. Right foot first, mind!"

The partygoers entered, all carefully stepping over the threshold on the proper foot.

Alone on the stoop, Quartilla looked carefully about, as if cautious of being observed. Muffling the Dormouse's snores against my chest, I held my breath, fearful that she would spot me. Lit by the torches, she seemed to have stepped fresh from an Alma-Tadema canvas, a pre-Raphaelite goddess, raven-haired, samite-gowned.

As I savored her delicate beauty, she lit her posy from one of the torches, filling the air with fragrant smoke. Tossing the burning herbs to the stones, she lifted her skirts and squatted over the small bonfire. The sound of her piss quenching the little fire filled the air.

"By Priapus and Hecate, Mithra and Eileithya, I command the demon to appear now!"

A queer impulse urged me to step forward, and I did.

Quartilla shrieked and lost her balance, tumbling over backwards, her skirts billowing around her waist.

Cradling the Dormouse in one arm, I extended a hand to help her up. Somewhat fearfully, she took it. When she was standing, I said, "Here I am. What do you want?"

The priestess's eyes were large with awe. "I can't believe this, it's like a dream come true! I should have known it would happen on the night before my final exam! Though I *have* been trying to summon up a demon for ages. . . . But anyway, here you are, just like that, familiar and all. Why, there wasn't even any smoke or thunder. . . ."

"Smoke and thunder are out of fashion where I come from, except in balancing the imperial debt, in which case we also employ mirrors."

"Well, it's not as if I'm complaining, you understand. You're quite impressive as you are, what with your strange attire and all. Is that a gallows rope round your neck? Never mind, you needn't say, if it embarrasses you. One thing, though—I wasn't aware demons needed to shave as mortal men do."

"You caught me on an off week. My wife left me."

A gleam appeared in Quartilla's eyes. "Ah, naturally. Every incubus must be mated with a succubus. . . ."

"That she was," I agreed.

Quartilla grabbed my hand again. "You must come back to temple with me! Once Albucia, the head priestess, sees you, I'll surely be promoted! Mom and Dad will be so proud!"

She tried to tug me off the porch, and I quickly disengaged. "Fraid not, priestess. I have to attend this party. Or some other."

Quartilla placed her thumb beneath her pert chin and her forefinger at the corner of her mouth. She looked absolutely charming. "You're under a geas, I take it."

"Yes. One of Bacchus's, curse him."

"Oh, *bim!* It's not wise to flout the wishes of Enorches, the Betesticted One. I advise you to comply with whatever compulsion he has put on you."

"As if I have a choice."

"Well, what about after the party? Could you come, then?"

I hated to disappoint her. "We'll see."

She lit up like Greek fire. "Wonderful! I'll stay right by your side all night! And so as not to divulge your true identity, I'll claim you as one of my *umbræ*, an uninvited tagalong guest."

Squirring Quartilla for the evening did not seem like such an awful prospect, so I nodded my consent.

"How shall I call you? 'Demon' will certainly not do. . . ."

"Loren."

"An uncouth name. How about 'Laurentius'?"

"Good enough."

Satisfied with my new nomenclature, Quartilla adjusted the lines of her skirt with a deft tug and knocked on the door of Trimalchio's big house. The same wrinkled servant appeared in no time and let us in.

A magpie in a golden cage hanging near the entrance shrieked hello. Ahead of us stretched a long colonnade painted with colorful frescoes.

"Do you note the bald and querulous old man who recurs in each scene? That's the image of our host."

"Did he really fight in the Trojan War and visit paradise with Mercury?"

Quartilla shrugged charmingly. "When you're rich

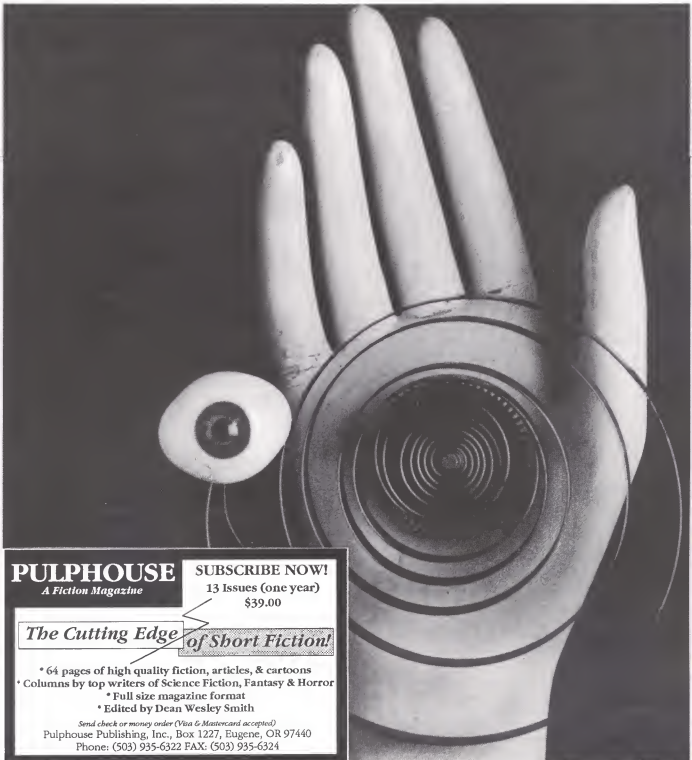
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enough, you may have painted whatever flattering fancy you wish."

The porter had retreated to a cubbyhole near the door and was busy shelling peas into a silver basin. Meanwhile, an epinec figure had stepped forward.

"The eunuch will show you to the feast," said the porter. "By the way, is that beast trained not to befool my master's fine carpets?"

I had almost forgotten I was carrying the snoozing Dormouse. "He's quite intelligent, although he does drip tea now and then."

"Well, don't let him drip on the brocades."

We followed the eunuch down the hall, and soon entered—right foot first—an expansive dining room.

The large crowded room was well lit by several oil-fixtures depending from the ceiling. Three large couches were arranged in a U-shape around a central table, and dozens of other smaller lounges and chairs were scattered about. People milled around, laughing, chattering, drinking and eating small elegant snacks.

As soon as we stepped in, we were besieged by servants.

Lissome boys poured ice water over our hands; the runoff was captured in golden bowls upheld by others. Then our hands were gently dried for us. (I was forced to drape the Dormouse over one shoulder.)

I felt my shoes being tugged off. "Hey—!"

Attendants were removing Quartilla's sandals also. "It's only the pedicure, Laurentius. Don't they have pedicures in Hades?"

"Not at parties."

Like a starved alley-cat adopted by Rockefellers, Quartilla was luxuriating under the attention. "It's one of the essentials of civilization. Ah, it seems like a lustrum since I last attended a good party!"

I cut the embarrassing procedure short. "Come on, let's meet our host."

Both of us now barefoot, we advanced across the carpeted room. I could see Quartilla was irked at having her pedicure interrupted. "Are all demons so impetuous and impatient?"

"Only those who have lost their wives, their jobs and their homes, and been thwarted in their suicide attempts."

"Oh."

We arrived at what Quartilla whispered to me was "the Upper Couch." Recumbent at one end, wrapped in a red felt scarf against a visible case of sniffles, was Trimalchio. The murals had not exaggerated any of his minor graces. Lying next to the millionaire was Hermeros: the breast of his toga was adorned with the tinselly shells of a dozen shrimps he had consumed, and he gripped a giant flagon of wine in one meaty paw. As we stood there, he emitted an enormous belch, followed by a 100-watt leer at Quartilla.

"Ah, my favorite priestess," lisped Trimalchio, "how nice of you to come. I trust your mistress, Albucia, is well . . . ?"

"Thank you for inviting me, honorable sir. Yes, my mistress fares well, although she is somewhat weary from servicing so many soldiers of late, as are all we

maidens of Priapus. You know what the average Legionary freshly returned from the provinces is like. . . ."

At this point, Hermeros made a grab at Quartilla's haunch, which she deftly sidestepped.

"Come here, you wench! I'll show you what kind of bronze balls swing under a real soldier's staff!"

"Then again," said Quartilla dryly, "it does not always require service in the deserts of Syria to render one witless. Sometimes, simple inbreeding will suffice."

There was a bustle behind us which caused Trimalchio to quickly lose interest in us. Before I could be introduced, he picked up a purple-striped tasseled napkin and, tucking it beneath his scarf, said, "Glad to hear it. Sit now, and take your pleasures."

We moved to empty spaces at the Middle Couch, and I gratefully set the snoozing Dormouse down. He had been getting quite heavy.

The dish which had diverted Trimalchio's salivating attention from us was being lowered to the central table by four waiters. The door-sized platter was framed with the inlaid signs of the Zodiac, each of which held its symbolically appropriate food. A metal dome in the middle of the platter was soon lifted to reveal several plump fowls, fish arranged in a trough of sauce as if swimming, and a hare with pigeon wings affixed to its shoulders to resemble Pegasus. Also occupying the board were two or three amorphous objects which I did not recognize.

Quartilla gripped my arm and shrieked gleefully. "Oh, Laurentius! My favorite dish! Fresh sow's udder!"

All the fear, excitement, tension and despair of the crazy night and the past week congealed into one greasy knot in my throat. I felt my gorge rising unstoppably, like an express train in my throat. I tried to get to my feet, but couldn't make it. I averted my head—and found a servant waiting with a copper receptacle ready.

Then I heaved for what seemed like a day.

As I sagged back onto the couch, drained and weak, a round of applause filled the room.

Trimalchio's voice carried above the diminishing clapping. "Quartilla's foreign guest takes first honors! Bestow the laurels upon him!"

A slave advanced and dropped a floral wreath over my head and around my neck.

Quartilla bestowed a peck on my cheek. "Well done, Laurentius. That was truly a demonic regurgitation for so early in the feast."

I accepted a damp scented cloth from yet another slave and wiped my mouth. "Thank you. I haven't done anything like that since college."

"Are you ready for some udder now?"

Suppressing a mild gagging, I replied, "No, please, you indulge yourself. I believe I'll just have something to drink. . . ."

"Mead for our champion, Laurentius!" commanded Quartilla, before spearing and slicing a teat.

I rinsed my mouth with the mead, and then lay back as a spectator to the party.

After all, how often did one get to attend a real Roman orgy?

My expectations, however, were greater than the real-

ity. If this was the height of the legendary decadence of Rome, than the twentieth century had them beat hollow. All anybody seemed interested in doing was gorging themselves on the various exotic dishes and gossiping. (Quartilla kept up with the best of the diners, in a somewhat appalling display of bone-stripping, lip-smacking, finger-licking avidity.) On the whole, I had been to wilder Rotary Club dinners. The height of excitement came when an argument flared between a husband and wife. She threw a plate at him, he ducked, and it narrowly missed Trimalchio.

"You bitch!"

"Bastard!"

Trimalchio intervened. "Julius and Melissa, I'm so *burt!* That was a piece of original *Corinthian!*"

"I'm sorry, Trimalchio. But he deserved it. I caught him with that slut Oenothra in the *privy!*"

Singers sang ("Tis a ditty from *The Asafoetida Man*," Quartilla informed me), dancers danced and jugglers juggled. After the course which consisted of a roasted whole boar stuffed with live thrushes, a pair of rowdy, disheveled jesters took the stage.

"My name is Haiga, and my comrade here is called Hatta."

"He's a lying Thracian!"

"Now, whatever would make you say such a cruel thing, Hatta?"

"You said I was called Hatta."

"Is that not your name?"

"Of course it's my name!"

"Then what's the problem?"

"My name is not what I'm called."

"Oh, I see. What are you called, then?"

"Mad!"

The audience cracked up. "A paradox worthy of Zeno!" complimented Trimalchio, tossing some coins at the performers.

Throughout the evening, I had sustained a virtually unrelenting barrage of glares and growls from Hermeros, who plainly resented my proximity to Quartilla. Whenever she leaned toward me, it provoked him to near madness. Several times I braced myself for a lunge that he fortunately never quite carried through, restrained perhaps by the setting.

The night wore on in a blizzard of food and drink. Every dish seemed more elaborate than the last, announced by Trimalchio with boorish delight. I drank cup after cup of mead, until my vision and hearing grew as fuzzy as the logic of the neural network that had stolen—would steal—my job two thousand years from now.

Somehow, it seemed like a good idea to lay my head in Quartilla's lap and go to sleep, whatever Hermeros might do. But that stupid hat of mine . . . I removed it and put it on the head of the Dormouse, where it wouldn't get lost.

All the chatter became a senseless babble, which lulled me to a hazy sleep. . . .

I came to with a start when the Dormouse screamed.

On the table was the latest offering from Trimalchio's

kitchens: nestled in a candied glaze were little rodents one-tenth the size of—but otherwise identical with—my personal Dormouse.

The Dormouse was jabbering in Latin. I snatched the hat off his head and put it on. Now I could understand both his English and the Latin of the others.

"What month is it? What month is it?" the Dormouse was demanding.

"Why, 'tis the month of Quintilus," answered Quartilla hesitantly when I asked.

I told the Dormouse.

"But that doesn't end in an 'O!'" he wailed. "Oh, how could they do such a cruel thing to my cousins, without even waiting till October?"

"October doesn't end with an 'O' either."

"But at least it begins with one!"

The whole room had gone quiet while the Dormouse and I conversed. Several people were making horned-finger gestures at me, against the evil eye. Then Hermeros, getting to his feet somewhat unsteadily, broke the silence.

"He's a magician, an evil magician! That's the only explanation of how someone so puny could have enraptured the priestess so. He must be slain to free her!"

Hefting his sword, Hermeros stumbled menacingly toward me.

I fumbled for the packet of transport-confetti, found it and managed to shake some on Quartilla, out of the hole the Dormouse had nibbled. Then I got the horn to my lips.

"He attempts to summon the aid of spirits!" yelled Hermeros, and threw himself clumsily at our couch.

As I gave a mighty blast on the party horn, I saw a single dot of confetti fall from Quartilla's shoulder onto Hermeros.

*Sbt!*, thought I.

The sun was so bright in comparison to the oil lamps at Trimalchio's, I couldn't see for a moment. I could only hope that Hermeros—had he indeed accompanied us—was suffering from the same disadvantage.

As I did not immediately feel a sword piercing my queasy guts, I assumed the bad-tempered soldier was squinting and rubbing his eyes as fiercely as I.

As the sun-dazzles cleared from my vision, the pellucid notes of an electric guitar sounded from some distance away, and I realized from other familiar noises that a constant stream of people was flowing around and past our little tableau.

Finally, I could see.

Quartilla was turning around in slow circles of slack-jawed amazement. Hermeros was dragging a clumsy hand slowly over his apish incredulous mug, the point of his blade resting on the ground. The Dormouse was unconcernedly asleep at my feet, the sad fate of his cousins forgotten.

We were in some modern city, standing at the gates of some park. Throngs of people, mostly young, were ambling past us and onto the grassy grounds. One of them, as he passed, tossed a newspaper in a trash can, and I claimed it.

It was the San Francisco *Oracle*, and its banner headline read:

FIRST HUMAN BE-IN TODAY!

It was 1967, ten years before I had been—would be—born.

The Summer of Love.

Quartilla had stopped turning, and now beamed at me.

"Laurentius, how marvelous! You have transported us to your Underworld home!"

"Close enough, give or take a decade or two and the width of a continent."

"Little did I ever suspect that the realm of Pluto held such wonders! Just wait until I report these marvelous adventures to Albucia!"

Instantly, I felt remorseful for having dragged this poor girl from her natural time and place. What had made me permanently wrench her from her home, other than greed for her beautiful company? And how could I ever tell her what I had done?

"Ah, yes, well, you see, Quartilla—*gack!*"

Hermeros's swordpoint was nicking my throat. I swallowed tentatively, and my Adam's apple measured the steel in micrometers.

"You fiend!" spat the soldier. "You vile fiend! Return us to Rome immediately, or I'll run you through!"

"Now listen, Hermeros, it's not as easy as you might think. . . ."

The blade pushed deeper. "No excuses! Do it!"

"I can't!"

Hermeros must have concealed in his back one of those buttons that Ann Marie had. His expression went instantly from mere anger to volcanic rage.

"Then I'm damned, and you're dead!"

I closed my eyes and tried to pray.

"Hey, man, quit goofin' around!"

"Yeah, brother. Be cool!"

I opened my eyes.

Two strange figures flanked Hermeros.

Both men had hair down to their navels or thereabouts, and flowers and peace signs painted on their faces. One wore a top hat, and the other flaunted a headband to which was affixed a droopy pair of cloth rabbit ears. The guy with the hat was dressed in a ruffled white shirt and denim bell-bottoms, while the other sported a fur vest over his hairy bare chest and tight green velvet pants.

"You could really hurt someone with that pigsticker," admonished Top Hat.

"Don't you know it's a day for groovin' in the sun?" inquired Rabbit Ears.

The sight of the hippies seemed to have discombobulated Hermeros. When at last he could speak he said, "I have seen Druids naked and painted blue, and lice-ridden Syrian anchorites blistering under the sun. But I'll sell my own mother into slavery if I've ever seen two such misbegotten hellspawn as these ones you have summoned, sorcerer." Stiffening his resolve, Hermeros readjusted his

sword for a thrust. "Though they rend me into pieces, I shall yet have my revenge!"

Top Hat turned to me. "What did he say, man?"

"He's very pleased to meet you, but he still intends to kill me."

Rabbit Ears clucked his tongue. "Major uncool."

"Bad vibes."

"Bringdown city."

"Total bummer."

Putting two fingers in his mouth, Rabbit Ears produced a loud whistle.

Out of the crowd materialized a brace of enormous Hell's Angels, filthy, bearded and leather-clad. They pinned Hermeros's arms before he could react.

I gulped gratefully. Thinking fast, I said, "He's a little high. Could you just hold him for a while, guys, until he comes down? And, oh, don't take him out of the park, will you?"

The last thing I wanted was to destroy San Francisco on such a happy historic day.

"Sure, man," grunted one of the Angels. "That's what we're here for." Then they marched the struggling Hermeros off.

I knew the respite was only temporary. Linked to me by the confetti, Hermeros would remain my problem. Still, it felt good to be rid of him, even for a short while.

Quartilla had watched the whole affair with pale-faced consternation. Now she said, "You have mighty servitors here, Laurentius. I am astonished I could summon a demon as powerful as you."

"Looks count for a lot," I said.

The Priapic priestess blushed. "No one has complimented me in so long. It's just wham-bam-thank-you-goddess from most men I meet."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that from me." Mostly because we'll never have any privacy, I added mentally.

There came a gentle coughing. I turned toward the hippies, who were smiling bemusedly.

"You cats gonna join the party now?" asked Top Hat.

"What else?" I replied.

"Far out!" exclaimed Rabbit Ears. "I knew you were dressed up to get down!"

I suddenly realized what I looked like. Barefoot, wearing a crumpled garland, stubble-faced and vomit-bespattered, accompanied by a gal wrapped in a bedsheet. Yet somehow I fit right in.

"I don't believe we've swapped handles yet," said Top Hat. "My name is Fletcher Platt, and my friend here is Lionel Stokely David van Camp, heir to the canned vegetable fortune, and otherwise known as 'LSD.'"

Fletcher took off his top hat and bowed to Quartilla, while LSD kissed her hand.

"I'm Loren, and this is, um, Quartilla."

"Cool. What's the story with the rat?"

I had forgotten the Dormouse. "He's—I mean, it's, uh—a capybara! That's it, a capybara. World's largest rodent. Comes from South America."

The hippies regarded the snoring Dormouse dubiously. "Shouldn't it be, like, on a leash, man?" asked LSD.



"No, he—it's quite domesticated."  
"Groovy. Well, what are we waiting for? Let's make the scene!"

So we made the scene.

Meandering through the rapidly filling park, Dormouse cradled against me, I relished the illusion of freedom. Unlike claustrophobia-inducing indoor parties, the large-scale Be-in, with its fresh air, sun and sky, seemed like heaven.

We bought hot dogs from a vendor (Quartilla bit into hers tentatively, then ate it with gusto, while the Dormouse consumed most of mine in his sleep), and made our way toward Hippie Hill, where we could command a view of the stage.

On the way, I kept an eye peeled for Bacchus. Surely he would materialize at such a major bash as this. If I could only lay my hands on him, perhaps there was a chance I could undo what he had done to me.

But there were simply too many people. I estimated the crowd at several thousand, and not one that I could see was dispensing wine from his palm.

At the top of the hill, we flopped on the grass. Below us, a band was wailing.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Man, where have *you* been?" said Fletcher. "Don't you recognize Quicksilver Messenger Service?"

I shook my head in amazement. "What history. It's like being at Woodstock."

"History? 'Woodstack? Man, you're some wiggy cat!"

Quartilla seemed captivated by the music, so I explained to her who was playing. But in Latin, it came out funny.

"Mercury's Heralds? What an honor!" She began to sway with the tune.

I lay back on the grass. Lord knew where I would end up after this. If only I could relax for a moment—

As if reading my thoughts, LSD hove into view. He was brandishing a joint.

"Care for a toke?"

"Mega-awesome, dude."

"Huh?"

"Uh, right on!"

Pretty soon, after the third joint had circulated among us, the day turned transparent, and all my cares seemed to melt away.

Quartilla giggled. "I feel like the Delphic Oracle."

"Hey, man," exclaimed LSD, "I understood that! This dope is bringing back my high-school Latin!"

"Even the Caterpillar, curmudgeon that he was, let me sample his pipe now and then."

Dormouse was awake, leaning on both elbows on my thigh.

Fletcher and LSD had turned to stone at the first word out of the Dormouse. Their eyes were big as Mad Tea Party saucers.

LSD was the first to recover. Oh-so-slowly he extended his hand holding the joint to the Dormouse, who took it, puffed deeply, then handed it back.

"Thank you, sir. Did I ever mention that you resemble a friend of mine?"

LSD took a long drag on the roach. "Heavy, man. Beyond heavy. What was that phrase you used before, man?"

"Mega-awesome?"

"You got it!"

LSD lit a new joint off the old one, and now the five of us partook.

The day wore on peacefully. Someone came by handing out free cold beers from a cooler. Another someone laid a gift on us: a can of compressed air with a horn attached. Fletcher and LSD took turns sending out blasts of sound until they grew bored.

As the afternoon began to shade into night and the Be-in began to show signs of winding down, I grew melancholy, as did the others.

"Man, don't you wish a day like this could go on forever?" asked Fletcher, in what he falsely assumed was a rhetorical mode.

I was still a little high. "You'd like life to be one big party?"

"Well, hell, man—who wouldn't?"

I took the confetti out of my pocket. "I've got the power to grant your wish, boys. I sprinkle you with this magic pixie dust"—I suited action to words—"and the next time I blow this horn"—I showed them the horn—"your endless party begins."

The hippies chuckled. "Whatever turns you on, man."

"You'll see how—" I started to say, when I felt cold steel in my back.

"Now I have you, sorcerer!" said Hermeros.

I made to raise the horn to my lips, but a jab from the blade stopped me.

"Don't try it!"

Fletcher stepped forward. "Here, let me."

He took the horn from my hand and jammed it into the nozzle of the air can.

Then he mashed the button down.

The magic horn blared without cease and the universe exploded.

Like a film run at a zillion frames per second, all the parties of history began to rush by.

I was dancing on the *Titanic*, I was sharing a picnic with two Frenchmen and a naked woman, I was a champagne-guzzling spectator at a Napoleonic battlefield, I was boogieing at Club 54, I was in a temple in Egypt, a yurt in Mongolia, a ballroom in Russia. And that was the first nanosecond.

Summoning up every ounce of will, I tried to turn around. It was like wading through treacle. I could only move in those brief picoseconds when I flashed through a gaudy party.

Like stone eroding, I pivoted to confront Hermeros. It took ten million million parties, but at last I was facing him.

At that instant, the horn stopped. Fletcher must have managed to lift his finger.

We were surrounded by a ring of dinosaurs. *T. rexes*, I believe. And they were dancing, shaking the earth. Partying, to be precise.

Hermeros was stunned, but I had no mercy.

"That ain't no way to have fun," I advised him. Then I gave him a tremendous shove, propelling him beyond the circle of beasts.

At the same time, I yelled to Fletcher, "Hit it!" The horn sounded, just in time.

The actinic radiation from Hermeros's explosion chased us through a thousand frames, forcing us to close our eyes. But it never quite caught us.

From First Be-in to Great Die-off. Mea culpa, man. Silence. Blessed silence. The can must have run out of air.

I opened one eye timidly, then the other.

Fletcher was holding the shredded remnants of the magic horn, which had disintegrated under the prolonged blast.

And, I realized with a shock, we were in Ann Marie's apartment, with the Millennial New Year's Eve party seemingly still in full swing.

I collapsed into a chair. "Straight back to my old problems. Bummer, man."

Ann Marie bustled up, perky as ever. "Loren! I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Don't play games with me, Ann Marie. You don't know what I've been through."

"Well, how *could* I? I haven't seen you in twenty years, ever since that night you cut out so *rudely* after worrying me nearly to *death*!"

"Twenty . . . ?" I looked more closely at my hostess. Sure enough, those were lots of brand-new lines on her face.

So I wasn't in my starting place after all. Which meant that I was still a potentially explosive intruder, with no means of escape. As soon as this party was over, I and

my companions would go up with enough force to split the earth.

I hung my head. "I'm so sorry, everyone. I really am."

"What are you *whining* about *now*?" said Ann Marie.

"I swear, Loren—you're probably the only *person* in the world who's not having *fun* these days!"

"How's that?"

"Well, you *know*. Ever since the neural whatsits took over all work and government, it's been one big *party*!"

I looked up. "You're telling me than no one has to work anymore . . . ?"

"Of course not! Where *have* you been, Loren? It's just play, play, play, from sunup to sundown, anywhere on the globe you go!"

I turned to Fletcher and LSD, who had been standing by curiously. "Guys, here's that endless party I promised. Sorry the ride was a little bumpy."

"Cool."

"Groovy."

"Where's the drugs?"

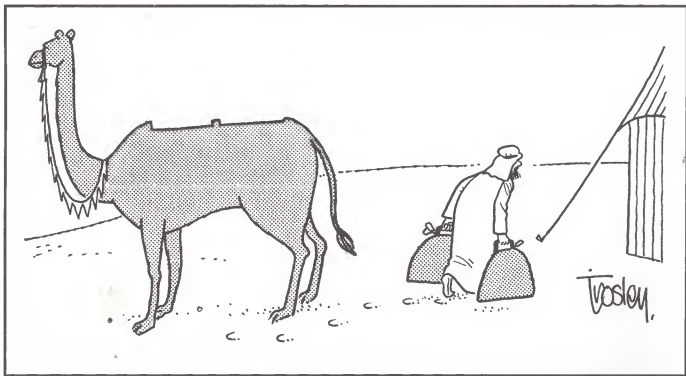
Ann Marie took one on each arm. "Right this way. Loren, try to have *fun*! By the way, boys, I *love* your costumes!"

For the first time since we had met, Quartilla and I were alone. If you could count being adjacent to a sweaty game of Co-ed Naked Twister alone. I took her hands and gazed into her eyes.

"Bacchus be praised," was all I could finally say.

"Yes. And I'd be happy to show you how."

And as we made our way to the bedroom, I heard the Dormouse exclaim, "I say, is that a hookah I hear burbling?" ♦



# Mad Maud's Dance

Phillip C. Jennings

Juko's mind was colorful and stretchy. Her fruit-fed imagination rarely held fixed for long. It served her like a show hall, dedicated to improvisation and cheap theatrics.

As the *Maïdo* floated over a tawny canyon, the curtains of her whimsy parted. Ta-da! She saw all of Route 2, ribboning from pylon to pylon around the entire girth of Mars.

Locksleys? Yes. Scores of evenly spaced cargo dirigibles sailed on their tethers, west to east. Yet they seemed wrong for her vision. They were sadly lifeless, not frolicking like aerial dervishes, not true creatures of the spirit of flight.

On the world-encompassing scale of Juko Blasovo's imagination, their creeping pace suggested slavery rather than freedom. She danced whirls above them, mocking them to scorn—just as she sometimes danced in real life on the deck of her own *Maïdo*, skipping along the grip-rails until Vas-leo yelled her down. Somehow she'd been born immune to any fear of heights, and her senior coworker loved her and hated her, and was intensely jealous.

Back to reality. No time to dance now! Juko loosened her hood and shook out her hair,



Illustration by Randy Asplund-Faith

alone in her gun-bucket, imprisoned by duty. *And which is madness*, she asked herself. *That, or this?*

Right now (late spring, the sixth week of Dartüno) her tiepatched eyes hunted for snomos, their bandit-bodies glowing in the infrared frequencies, great diffuse sources of muted heat. She scanned forward along the *Maüdo's* starboard flank, and her view lifted as Route 2 scaled toward the high gap between Elysium Mons and Hecate, more than five kloms above sea level.

Designed half by engineers and half by politicians, Route 2 never veered from thirty degrees north latitude, no matter what wild heights its pylons ascended. Juko smiled as cliffs and pinnacles rolled toward her. This was what Mars was *supposed* to look like, all red and raw and stark.

The real thing! The Mars of the history fruits she had eaten as a schoolgirl! Elysium was pioneer country even yet, on a planet crowded by eight million dimes. She patted the rifle that proved it, and swiveled Mister Magoo on its pintle mounts. It moved freely across its wide field of action.

Yes, hers was a pioneer's job. In this wilderness, locksley crews needed her help. Frozen gases had built up the Martian atmosphere. The last two comets, Proehl and Yildiz-Kaya, ushered in the modern age; the *fifth intercometary*. Yet the high air she breathed with the help of an airsnood was too thin to deal with locksleys laden with cargo.

It could not bear them up. They needed booster tanks to reach altitude, and ride the winds to Adamstown.

Floater like her *Maüdo* came shaped for the job, their decks slung low between port and starboard vacuum chambers. Fabricated on the moons, they held perfect vacuums inside hard shells. They were so buoyant it was hard to crank them down and slip them under the big-bellied locksleys they were supposed to lift.

Afterward, on the east side at Adamstown Station . . . but Juko sighted down the barrel of Mister Magoo as a reminder not to get too far ahead of herself. First they had to get there. That meant watching for hostile snomos.

Which leg of the circuit was more demanding? Out of Adamstown she and Vasleo had to mother the *Maüdo* home via the Route 2 shunt, even if wild snomos took potshots at them. But any sensible hostiles would ambush long before that, hoping to snatch this locksley's cargo.

They'd do it sometime in the next eight hundred kloms. Too much! No person of mere flesh could strain her vigilance across such a distance, and "good" snomos made life more complicated. It wouldn't do to mow down anything that glowed. Almost Juko regretted that the war was over. Back then a gunner could figure any snomo was up to banditry or sabotage. *Shoot first and ask questions later*. Sometimes Vasleo talked about the war. Juko tried to imagine him eight years ago, a young dime without that godawful pot-belly of his.

This was boredom! Surely she wasn't that desperate yet! Not with eighteen hours left to go. How stupid to think about Vasleo when wild country lay all around; the reds, the greens, the weave of desert streams, the play of sun and shadow! To wonder what her senior

coworker looked like naked, because that was the last sight Juko ever wanted to see. The idea was so appalling it fascinated her. Skinny Vasleo, except for that blobb-glow bloating out like a tumor.

Juko sighed. Vasleo should have gotten promoted long ago, replaced by some new hunk who'd have to obey her orders! Most of a decade shepherding floaters! By now he should be third mate on a locksley. It didn't bode well for her own career. Had he offended someone? Not made the right friends? Who *were* the right friends?

*Have I thought about everything yet?* Juko asked herself impatiently. Eight hundred kloms to go, with her thoughts already cycling in over-familiar grooves. It was either dance or go mad! She felt trapped, just as the *Maüdo* was trapped by her tethers, sailing east, then shunting west, and back again. The same distances over and over.

*Well, no. I could think about fruit.* Those bushes out there, spaced widely apart—mostly they'd been planted by Route 2 landscapers. Someone might eat from them in a disaster and learn how to set a broken bone, or how to survive overnight when the temperature dropped to forty below.

Nobody loved workaday fruit. There were no cults of medicine, like there were cults of Plotwitians, or Pure Martians, or Tracolianos.

Fruit fans grew libraries to feed their enthusiasms. Juko could inventory a dozen sects, none of which she wanted to join. She was too fickle to settle down inside one confining reality. She was—

*Hell!* She set tiepatch magnification to 10x. Hurriedly she donned her comm-helmet. "*Maüdo* starboard to *Sikago* locksley control. Snomos at two o'clock, distance two point two kloms. Snomos attempting concealment at two point two kloms. Cannot estimate how many."

*"Copy, snomos two o'clock, two-plus kloms. Or some escaped musk oxen."*

"Just doing my job, captain," Juko answered. "They're big and furry. Otherwise they'd glow better. Ping 'em if you want to know for sure. Musk oxen don't carry metal."

Silence. Juko tried to guess what was being done up in the locksley's bridge. Suddenly she found out.

The captain's voice was tight, half an octave higher than before. "*Locksley Sikago to trailing base, Sikago to trailing base. Snomos at two fourteen point nine one oh five. Red alert status, tangency in forty seconds. Thirty-five. Thirty . . .*"

"Red alert" meant Mister Magoo was freed to fire at Juko's command. She slid behind her grips, and took rough aim. She'd seen heat leaking from both sides of that big rock, but maybe the hostiles had used their brains. Maybe they intended everyone to focus there, so they'd have an easy shot from somewhere else.

It wasn't fair being a dirigible. The locksley over Juko's head didn't have the *Maüdo's* hard shell, and if the *Sikago* deflated, she'd bring everything down under her weight of cargo. The odds were all in favor of banditry, at least to begin with. Even knowing she was being played for a dupe, Juko still had to hold to her present target. That made the whole thing even less fair.

With the wind from behind, sleep-gas would make a fine weapon, effective and bloodless. Just broadcast a few tons . . . but the atmosphere of Mars was an artifact, too precious to mess with. Politics!

They drifted past the target. "*T minus five*," the locksley captain chanted. "*T minus ten. T minus fif—*"

A shot cracked out. That meant it was much too late. The bullet had already done damage, unless it missed or hit the *Maüdo*, which served as the *Šikago*'s protective shield.

"*. . . possible puncture. Damage report pending. T minus twenty-five.*"

Juko's gun-bucket was angled to make it easy for her to cover the whole range from eleven to four o'clock, but dammit she would lose the one sodding target she had in ten more seconds. Just as she was getting a glimpse about that rock, too! "Mister Magoo? Take it," she said grimly.

The gun calculated, target vulnerability versus narrowing window. It popped off six shots. Big moment, eh? Juko swung around, hunting for other bandits.

Was the *Maüdo* keeping altitude? "*. . . T minus forty. Damage positive, repeat positive. We have a breach on the port side, bag P-top-3.*"

Port? That was her senior's domain. "Vasleo, you see anything?" Juko asked over Band Two.

"No!" he shouted, louder than necessary. Was this the courageous Vasleo of the old snomo war? She wanted to tease him. She always liked to poke fun when he grew sharp and bosslike. But this was no time to distract the man; he guarded his flank as she guarded hers, while the *Šikago*'s crew staffed their own gun-buckets in the locksley's prow and stern.

Despite all that firepower and an armed enemy, she heard little but silence and the captain's radio mutterings. "*Position two fourteen point nine one oh seven. We're losing buoyancy.*"

"*Copy two fourteen point nine one oh seven. Aerial rescue crew launch one minute, ETA twenty-five minutes.*" Juko wasn't sure how she heard that, or if she was supposed to. If the snomos had radio and good decryption, they'd know just when to expect the rescue plane.

Now what? As Juko scanned the ground, more shots rang out. They were answered by higher fire from the locksley's prow, with its wide range of function.

A good gun up there, where any ambitious gun would want to be. It probably tested for better accuracy than Mister Magoo: a real sharpshooter. And it wouldn't waste ammunition. A couple dozen shots meant five or six snomo casualties. A tragedy for the bad guys. They had to hope that the locksley's cargo was worth so much blood.

Was it? Juko tried to remember if she'd been told what they were freighting. Mostly she didn't bother to ask. Curiosity just gave Vasleo a chance to pull rank and say it was none of her business.

What a jerk. Juko let her imagination run free. She "saw" Vasleo five hours ago, peeping at the manifest, finding out what the *Šikago* was carrying, then signaling ahead to his snomo cronies. "*Distract the crew's attention to starboard, then shoot from the port side. I'll arrange*

*not to see you. We'll split the loot. And I'll have revenge on the people who never promoted me!*"

"Is that all?" the bandit leader answered.

"*There's this saucy dime bitch—don't kill her. She's mine. Juko's played with my heart too long! I plan to teach her the consequences!*"

Juko wished her fantasies didn't make a warped sort of sense. In this crisis she and Vasleo needed to trust each other. And yet—snomos were human, more or less. Sometimes people went crazy and threw their lives away for nothing, but she was the craziest dime she knew, and *she* wouldn't attack a locksley out of sheer bad-tempered whimsy!

*What was their cargo?*

Damn again. "We're tilting." There was a technical vocabulary for this; pitch, yaw or roll. Juko chose her terms. "We're rolling starboard high. I won't be able to depress Mister Magoo to get any really close targets."

As if the locksley captain had her gunnery in mind! If this continued, the *Šikago* might tumble out of the *Maüdo*'s embrace. The locksley would pancake to the ground and the floater would go rebounding skyward!

That might be better than what was actually happening. They were dragging down closer to the Route 2 cable, closer to the pylons, closer to the rough rocks below. They might stay aloft another minute, but not long enough. They'd have to face snomos on the ground before the rescue plane arrived to chase them off. And those wouldn't be happy snomos.

More fire. Lots of gunplay this time, all out of sight, out of range, nothing she could do. The world darkened. Starboard was south, so why . . . ?

Juko went blind as dirigible fabric dropped over her bucket's range of view. She heard an explosion. Abandoning Mister Magoo, she lifted up into the crawl-tube, and waited for the crunch. It came gently, first a susurration, and then a few thumps and bangs.

Hmph. Not quite the drama she'd expected.

Now what? Her *Maüdo* lay under the *Šikago*'s dead skin. Juko bounced her insignificant thirty-kilogram mass up and down without effect—no indication that the floater was *almost* buoyant enough to slip free.

The crawl-tube was dark, and much too tight to admit snomos seven times her weight—too tight even for the few "normal" humans left on Mars. Air freight was a dime monopoly. Thanks to some clever designer, the passage had bends at either end. It was a little Z-shaped wormhole cut through the starboard vacuum chamber, and she could hide in the middle.

She did, trying to control her breath and stave off panic. She heard more shooting, and then some loud yells. "Yah, you fuggers!" It was strange to hear English, and stranger yet to understand it. Juko had eaten an English-language fruit not long before, but she doubted she could shape her mouth to make such muddy vowels and diphthongs.

Snomos did nothing for their reputation by holding to their archaic language. They just demonstrated their scorn for progress and the ideals of planetary management. "Charge set, sir!" one of them shouted—if a voice

so deep could be said to "shout." "Roar" seemed a better word.

Another explosion. "Tail section secured!"

"Okay, cut through this shit here. Skinner! Hong! Take the other side. Pierre, you found those reefer boxes yet?"

"Yeah! Back here."

"Leave 'em on. Toss everything else. We've got fifteen minutes."

Fifteen minutes. It couldn't be enough for all the work they were taking on. What kind of stupid plan was this?

Juko heard thunks, and ripping noises. Things shattered. Light broke into the crawl-tube from the deck, light occluded with flitting shadows. God! Of course snomos were strong, but they must really be doing things she'd only seen on video. Lifting huge cargo boxes and throwing them overboard. Tearing away the ribs and lines of the *Sikago* and her surviving balloons. And all this at a manic pace!

A fur-covered arm reached into the tube and flailed about. "She's further in," the deep-voiced snomo said.

"Get Vasleo. Tell him to haul her out."

Juko took a breath and shouted: "If that traitor comes in here I'll kill him! I'll cut him open!" The tube worked as a sounding chamber, but still she sounded like a child even to herself, hardly worth taking seriously.

Her accusation was wildly premature, Juko knew that. But if slaving like a madwoman kept her safely out of reach, she was all for it. "I know he's your tool!" she ranted. "He's not going to get me! If he's worth anything to you, keep him out of here!"

Had they heard? There was another enormous crash. Juko's spirits soared as she felt the *Maúdo* creak beneath her, alive and yearning to return to the skies. The noise made it hard to make out what was going on.

"... not armed. Just give me a handgun."

"Vasleo! You shit! You murdering creep!" Juko yelled. *Damn it, he was cooperating with them at the very least! Coward or traitor!*

"I'm a prisoner, that's all," Vasleo answered. "Just like you! What's gotten into your head? Listen, they promised not to kill us, but you've got to surrender or it's all off!"

"Just dare come in here with a gun! I'll know what kind of prisoner you are!" Juko answered. *What a sneak! What a worm!*

"Get her out of there before liftoff," the boss snomo said. "It's your job." Moments later something blocked the crawl-tube's light.

Juko tore forward. She reached, grabbed, fought blindly. "God . . . damn . . ." Vasleo tried to retreat. "Gah—Holy Jeem—my eye! Let go! Bitch! Bloody lesbo I'll kill you crazy damn slut you think you're too sodding good . . ."

The gun was huge, sized for a snomo hand. As soon as Juko had it mostly twisted around she pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Vasleo backed off in a panic, then flailed for her, swearing shrill oaths. He grabbed her helmet, and it tore off. Again Juko used two hands to seize his weapon. The trigger stayed locked no matter how hard she squeezed. She felt and found something behind the stock, something that slid up.

Shrieking obscenities, Vasleo renewed his attack, his

bony fingers thrusting and clutching. She fired. Flame filled the tube. Juko saw orange and red, the orange and red of Vasleo's shocked face minus his jaw. Then that blinding flash was veiled by equally blinding darkness.

The *Maúdo* lurched. No doubt about it: the snomos were working her free, trying to get her aloft. Juko backed away, finding wetness wherever she put her hands, until she toppled into her gun-bucket.

The bucket rose. The floater came to life, still weighed down to port and prow. Its stern-high angle gave Juko a modicum of light. This was all happening because the snomos wanted it to, but how did they figure to outrun a chase plane in a thing like this?

Juko heard more bumps and thumps. She saw tumbling shadows. The attack force was abandoning the *Maúdo*! Leaping off! With each loss of two hundred kilos, the floater strained further against her bonds.

And then—*whoop!*—she sprang free. Torn dirigible fabric flapped as she spun into the sky.

It was like being caught in a cyclone. Juko braced for the moment the floater's tether would snap tight. She held her breath.

After half a minute she started breathing again. "What the hell? Did they cut the bloody line?"

No one was near to answer. Was anyone out there? Suppose they'd put a time bomb on the *Maúdo*'s deck? Suppose they hadn't attacked in order to *seize* the cargo, but to *destroy* it?

Then everything made sense. And Juko's one chance was to find that bomb and pitch it before it went off!

Vasleo's juices dripped into the bucket, spraying the clear walls with red. Juko couldn't foul herself worse than she was by wriggling past his corpse, but that didn't make it fun. She held the handgun ahead of her, just in case. Fighting centripetal forces, she crab-crawled into the glare of day.

The sky carouselled in circles. A snomo lay belly down, gripping ropes with his paws. He glared, eyes out of focus, his airsnood wet with puke. "Dizzy ride, huh?" Juko said.

He lurched to his feet, roared, charged not quite in the right direction, and fell, as incapacitated as a drunk-en ape. The bomb lay behind the puddle he'd left. Juko stood and stumbled for it, and missed. Bad angle. She tried again. Reality and the twirling constructs of her eye and brain were out of phase, but she managed to grab it.

On his knees, the snomo took aim with a handgun. His shot went wild. Fortunately guns that size had no corrective intelligence at all.

The deck was a shambles. Juko put struts and tatters and boxes between her and the snomo. The floater's residual spin gave her seven-league boots as she staggering rearward. "No!" he howled. "I'll kill you—I'll kill you!"

He shot again, still handicapped by vertigo. Juko didn't waste time firing back: she was anxious not to jostle the bomb. First things first. The floater had taken damage here. Its deck curled away from what had been the stern, pieces like flower-petals curving up and in. She hugged the nearest bit of wreckage and dropped the explosive into . . . into . . .



Wow. Juko had never been so high up. She should have known. Snomos were more genetically adapted for outdoor Mars than any other edition of humanity, and yet that guy behind her was using an airsnood.

That guy. She whirled around. He was on his feet now, a dozen meters away. Everything about his wobbly posture signified defeat. "Go ahead," he growled. "Kill me—what's the use? All our sacrifices for nothing!"

Juko stared. The *Maüdo* lifted and shook, knocking her to the deck. The bomb blast assaulted her ears. Again the floater went spinning like a top.

She held on for dear life, hardly conscious of the snomo's labored grunting and snuffling until his paw landed on her arm. He squeezed. Her hand popped open, and he took her gun. She had no chance of resisting. Compared to Vasleo she was muscled, but next to a snomo any dime was a sickly child.

The *Maüdo* slowed in its whirling. Juko looked up to see the snomo empty his snood a second time. He forced a toothy smile. "It's not too late after all," he said.

"The chase plane—"

"Any minute now," the snomo agreed, remaking himself. To her surprise he switched languages. "That's the big problem. My friends will do their best to bring it down. They left me here to take care of you. Suicide mission, and I'm not even dead yet! Damn—for a dime, you're a nuisance. Stop it, okay? Unless you really want another war."

"You're the ones who attacked us." Juko didn't have the strength to sound as outraged as she felt.

"The high country belongs to us," he spoke in his barbaric accent. "To our herds. Do we sow weeds in dime croplands? Look at these embryos! What would happen to us if stuttered cats and dogs took after our cattle? Your side is using the peace to wage ecological war!"

"Embryos? Stuttered?"

The snomo tore open a reefer box. A dime with power-waldoes might have done the same thing in maybe a minute or two. "Look inside."

Juko saw egg-pockets, glazed with frost on the outside. She cast around, hoping to hear the buzz of an air-plane. So much had happened! It had to be more than twenty-five minutes by now!

The snomo backed off, and gestured to invite her forward. She crawled reluctantly and wiggled free one of the melon-sized lumps. The pocket opened along its lips.

The creature inside was wetly dark, a kitten with a ridiculous number of legs. "This is some awful predator?" Juko asked.

"It'll grow to three times my mass," the snomo answered as he assailed the next box in line. "Each vertebral stutter doubles its length and appetite. Count the extra leg-pairs. Our herds are stuttered; oxen, horses . . . believe me, we know what's being done. They were to be nurtured in Adamstown, and released."

"And to stop this you were prepared to die."

The snomo nodded. "Hardly suicide. My soul was saved to silicon before the attack. It's in the clan chapel. If I'm killed it only means a loss of these few hours and a useful body."

"I can't think that way. Your duplicate can't be *you*," Juko said, watching embryo-pockets slither out onto the deck. The snomo continued his work of destruction, not distracted by questions of cyber-theology.

She heard a thin whine and pulled up onto her feet. The *Maüdo* was waltzing slowly now, a slave of the winds. They blew her north and east toward the volcanic mount of Hecate. She shielded her eyes to look for the rescue plane.

"They'll strafe the deck," the snomo said. "Crawl back into your tunnel. You'll be protected."

"I—I can communicate. I'll get my helmet. We can be rescued, but I'll need your promise not to shoot."

"Sorry. You better hurry off." The snomo tore into another box. By now the deck was slithery with half-frozen embryo-pockets. Juko reeled away from the stern, wondering why she was still alive.

Because she was incapable of further mischief? She stood confused just short of the starboard vacuum chamber, repelled by the idea of Vasleo's corpse. Perhaps his comm-helmet was in his own tunnel on the port side. Yes, that was the place to go. A clean refuge, and a radio.

She lunged across, barely in control of her own stride, climbing uphill against the spin and then down, though the deck was flat all the way. The port tube was the mirror image of her own, terminating in a bucket and Vasleo's own weapon. Juko's nose had been assaulted by too many harsh pungencies to notice the man's odor, no matter how many anxious hours he'd spent in this close space.

No helmet, though. Damn.

She turned to crawl back out. The plane's drone scaled to a high-pitched yowl. She heard the brief chatter of its guns. The engine sound diminuendoed and grew loud again, without further fire.

The snomo was dead. Juko didn't have to see his corpse to know that. The plane flew one more shrill pass while she made her way up the crawl-tube. It was a shrinking mote by the time she got outside and onto her feet.

There was nothing for it but to crawl down the starboard tunnel and fetch her own helmet. Juko wondered how long she'd been trembling like the victim of some neural defect. Everything took twice as long as it needed to. The fetor of her tube made her vomit, as the mere spinning of the floater had failed to do.

She forced herself to go on, to grab the helmet, and retreat outside. Then she scuttled for someplace less than perfectly filthy to catch her breath and quell her pounding heart. She flipped to Band One. "*Maüdo* to search plane, *Maüdo* to search plane. Hit me please, search plane. This is Juko Blasovo, still alive on the floater you just strafed. I'm alone. Over."

"Uh, yes. Copy, *Maüdo*. Just hold on. We've got another errand, and then we'll come back."

Juko slumped with relief. They'd find her sprawled like a corpse, and bundle her to some hospital . . . She frowned. She'd have to explain about Vasleo. He was a traitor. That's what she'd tell them, but was it true?

Or was it more true that the dimes of Adamstown were

transgressing the peace by introducing large carnivores to this part of Mars? There the things lay all over the deck, eggs, not even thawed, because the air was so cold at this altitude. Juko could bomb Elysium plateau with embryo-pockets, and they'd splat when they hit. Or they'd hold together, but die for lack of care.

Actually, this wouldn't be the time to drop them. Hecate loomed high, and if any of the burdened *Maïdo's* vacuum tanks were punctured, the floater's equilibrium altitude might already be quite a bit less than seven kloms above sea level. Six kloms? Juko forced a laugh, despite her aching ribs. At six kloms, what tiny fraction of Mars could the *Maïdo* possibly broadsides?

If that plane didn't come back . . . Now *there* was something to worry about. Radically subzero temperatures when the sun went down. No water. Juko groaned as she forced her body into motion.

She found the *Maïdo's* emergency kit, and fumbled it open. She was happy to strip out of her fouled tunic and breeches, and climb into the thermals and weather-suit she found tightly wrapped inside. The suit's color was startlingly blue-green, impossible to miss against the red of the Martian highlands.

She dragged the rest of the kit to Vasleo's tube. Gun-buckets tapped into lockkeys like the *Šikago* for electrical power. Without generators or batteries, their heaters were useless. Nevertheless, the port vacuum chambers all around the crawl-tube would make good insulation for tonight's shelter.

Juko scoured the deck for something to use as a receptacle. She emptied a plastic carton, and started filling it with frost chips from the reefer boxes, ignoring the dead snomo who lay flattened, his once-white fur matted and motley.

She didn't stop until the carton was full. She listened to Band One all that time. The silence confused her. By now the plane could have returned to base. Maybe its errand was to attack the enemy on the ground, and the snomos shot it down. She might be far enough from that action that she'd not even hear it!

The air here was thin and weak. It was poor at carrying sound, but there was no other sound at all, no competition except her own labored breathing, muffled by her airtound. When Juko thought about it, the hush was extraordinary. It told her she was lost and forgotten, the only soul on Mars. She was almost ready to believe it.

She was alone and flying free. In all her career she'd had two directions to worry about, east and west. Now she had angled off. Hecate was an enormous volcanic massif, but perhaps not getting any closer. She was slipping by, and both Hecate and the westering sun would converge behind her.

Night. A shift of wind. Both were inevitable, and soon she'd be utterly disoriented. But many people had died today. At least she was still alive.

An optimist would look at this deck and see resources. Juko tried to awaken the imagination she'd had an hour ago. *Let's see. As long as the reefer boxes work, they'll collect frost.* Okay, that took care of her water needs.

Food? A couple dozen bars in the emergency kit. And

... ish! Snomos ate meat. They might wrinkle their noses at embryos—raw, cold embryos—but they'd manage . . .

Enough. Juko felt queasy at the trend of her thoughts. Biologically, dimes might be omnivorous. Culturally it was impossible. Better to starve than to return to dime society and have it whispered that she might have . . . she might have . . .

Forget it. *Let's approach things the opposite way.* What was there the most of on this deck, and how could she use it?

Tattered dirigible fabric. Ultralight girders and struts, bent and twisted. Rope. Bag filament. The *Maïdo's* severed tether hung from her windlass. She could tie bits on to lengthen it, and cut up this wreckage into strips. There'd be enough to make a considerable line. She could dangle that line, and put herself in closer reach to the ground. The thing would look goofy, like an artifact. It would serve as a message that she was alive up here.

It would also do weird things to the floater's wind-profile. Juko wished her tiepatch were a full computer so she could model what would happen. Baby spiders rode threads on the wind; spiders had colonized Mars back in the fourth intercometary, part of the planet's accidental ecology. Floaters were almost unsteerable, but if a crew ran draglines out from two or three mobile booms and controlled their length . . .

Juko scanned the sky. Still no airplane. She hated to think ill of a probably dead pilot, but he'd *abandoned* her, damn it! She was lost over snomo country, visible across a hundred twenty square kilometers, doubtless an item of gossip on frequencies unavailable to her equipment, but what help was that? She represented evil, the sole guardian of an evil cargo, and it was odd that nobody down there was taking potshots at her.

These were the warmest hours she'd have to work in until tomorrow afternoon. Grimly, Juko started to organize chaos; piling ropes here and fabric there.

The *Maïdo* sailed on, Hecate definitely more distant than before, barren country below. North of Adamstown in her present direction the Phlegra Mountains ran straight to the Boreal Ocean—or what would be ocean when its basin completely filled. They were low mountains, and far out of view. Juko tried to imagine her line catching on some peak, but how? And then what? She'd come sliding down, right?

Juko laughed. She recognized herself for a hopeful fool. Somehow that made her work easier.

She kept on until dusk, then crawled into Vasleo's tube with the emergency kit. She used fabric to plug herself loosely inside.

The kit had stuff to make fire, but the warning labels dissuaded her. *Do not use in confined spaces or at extreme altitudes.* That left her no choice but to squeeze the Chemwarm packet. She ate a bar first, and waited for the nocturnal chill to work into her refuge. Then she kneaded the chemicals together, and tucked the thing inside her weather-suit, and went into a fetal huddle.

She'd either live or die. Toward the end it was clear she'd live, exhausted by a shivery night. Her hibernation was so void of events that despite its long cold misery,

Juko put it behind her as if she'd slept ten hours straight. She ate another bar and emerged into the light of dawn.

If the *Maüdo* had been tethered, and sailed straight east, it would be a couple hours short of Adamstown. There was still time for the Phlegra Mountains to appear ahead of her. Juko rubbed her cold hands, blew on them, replaced her snood, and set to work.

She knotted her line longer and longer. It began looping down from the floater, a loop she meant to be visible from below. On random occasions Juko flipped through her radio bands, and called for help. More rarely she stood off from her labors and stared at the landscape. Was it less boring ahead? A bit more hilly?

God damn! A kite! It danced ahead and off to port, and something was raising dust down where it came from. A kite, strung out on a line. If she could lasso that line somehow . . .

She bent over the *Maüdo*'s prow and stared down, her tiepatch at 10x. Snomos, on horseback! The animal had two, three, four pairs of legs, with space for three saddles on its serpentine back. It was about as big as a horse could grow in Martian gravity without spinal problems. And it was fast.

And it wasn't the only kite-horse rescue team in view. When she noticed this, Juko was overwhelmed by mixed feelings. She'd been abandoned by her own people, yet her enemies were going to desperate lengths to rescue her! She sobbed with emotions she dared not name. Gratitude? That depended on what they meant to do with her.

Should she cooperate? She'd be handing them her floater, with proof that Adamstown had abrogated the eight-year-old peace treaty! They could use her evidence to go to war!

But they'd lose. They must know that: they had lost twice before. They'd lose unless they fought Adamstown alone, and not the entire Boreal League.

Adamstown might be kicked out of the league. They deserved to be. Her embryo-evidence would make things happen, and maybe the League would learn to police itself better.

*Let's try this again.* Point one; justice lay with her enemies. Point two; people might die if she did the wrong thing. Point three; she'd used her only Chemwarm packet last night, and these next sunlit hours would be her last unless she took the opportunity the snomos were extending her.

Point four. A dime couldn't become a snomo, or survive at snomo livelihoods, or eat snomo food. She'd always been an outsider if she made herself a traitor to her own people.

Juko weighed them all. She found point three utterly compelling. She hurried back to her line, and secured the end of it to a grip-rail. She widened the loop to port and starboard as best she could, using lengths of ultralight girder.

It was up to the kite-players to thread her needle. They came close twice. One of the horses faltered and fell back, exhausted. Another trio rode in at an angle. This time . . . no. Yes! Juko ran to the windlass and be-

gan taking in the slack. The kite ran up and up, hundreds of meters ahead of her prow. When it became her kite, and snugly so, she grabbed its line and tied it to another rail.

She signaled and the floater jerked. Suddenly Juko felt the wind, as she'd not felt it before. She looked down. Something was digging a trench down there; a weight like a dragging anchor slowing her down.

Very well. She rolled down her windlass-loop and waited to snare the next kite. This would be lots easier; hers was a trotting pace for the horses, no longer a mad gallop.

In time three kites had her completely tethered. Their flapping plastic was covered with hastily spelled news: *Adams Town pulls swich on "Infamous Snomo Attack" says first no then yes they were killer-embrios but only for "zoo". Dime leagues are buying this lie to avoid emberrasment.*

So there'd been time for a *first* publicity release, and then more input, and then a *second* version of events! All this, and no rescue planes? Obviously the Route 2 people didn't know she was still alive!

She could invent any story she liked and waltz into Adamstown, neither traitor nor victim. All she had to do was get the snomos to help her. The fact that they were already helping meant she had something they wanted; the embryos. Irrefutable evidence. Stuttered cats and dogs for a zoo, huh? *Sixty* of them? *Sixty of each species?*

Juko let her improvised line hang straight, no longer a loop. The snomos winched her *Maüdo* closer to the ground—they were the ones with strength, not her. When the floater got pulled low enough, other snomos leapt on her homemade tether and brought her lower, knot by knot. Every knot was a weak link, but in time they reached the original line. One very brave snomo scrambled up that length, and added her two hundred kilos to the mass weighing the *Maüdo* down. She was the first of several. When the floater was grounded, others rolled rocks and boulders onto the deck. They fastened new lines until the thing was securely confined.

Juko led the first woman to the single undamaged reefer unit, the skin of her face windblown pink, her sagging nipples brown. Except for these features, she was a barrel of white shaggy fur, weather-insulating blubber, and muscle, with special emphasis on muscle. "Your hero didn't reach this one before he got strafed by the airplane," Juko told her, standing by his enormous corpse. "These embryos are still viable."

"And as evil as the others," the snomo woman growled.

"They're just cats and dogs. The genetic codes for lions and wolves were never brought to Mars, I suppose. And cats and dogs are domesticated animals," Juko answered. She hurried on, a day's worth of words bursting forth in what must sound like a crazy babble. "They can run feral. That's what Adamstown meant to happen, but it's not the only possibility. You snomos are terrific with animals. You can tame them while they're young, and use them in war and peace. Fitting, don't you think? Turn the whole scheme around, so the dimes of Adamstown utterly regret what they did!"

"Dimes. Your own people," the snomo said. "Maybe you should explain yourself."

"Yeah." *Nobody likes turncoats.* "You don't know how it is for dimes. Every city has its own government. Some of those governments are so bad, so dominated by fruit fanatics . . . Well, I refuse to feel guilty. Maybe I've handed you a weapon I could have kept from you. Maybe I'll have children, and my descendants will curse me. I still can't see it otherwise. I owe you twice over. Your hero let me live—I don't even know his name. He let me take shelter. Now you've saved my life again."

"Perhaps for a price," the snomo rumbled.

"These embryos pay that price," Juko answered.

"Yes, and they'll take time to hatch. What can we do with you in the meanwhile? We can't let you free until the young are mobile. Swear all the oaths you like; we still won't do it."

Juko shivered. "There's another wild animal," she said. "This floater of mine. We dimes kept her on a permanent tether, a slave to our locksleys. Today you proved that she can serve your will. I have some ideas how we might make the *Maïdo* almost steerable. Not against the wind, but good enough to claw a few degrees to port or starboard, and that could make a big difference. I'll need a computer—"

"I'll take you to my yurt. The clan mothers will vote tonight on your fate. I can guarantee nothing, you understand. But about the embryos; yes. It would be wise of us to see them well incubated."

She issued orders. Afterward the snomo picked Juko up, and cradled her in her massive arms as she strode off for her giant horse. *I'm a doll now, and a child,* Juko thought. *From a snomo point of view, dimes never grow up, and never become wise. But we're smart and tricky. Damn it, it's true, but that doesn't mean we have to live in eternal suspicion. There ought to be something two kinds of people can do together. . . .*

Somewhere along the ride, Juko and Alice exchanged names, and the tension began to ease. Among larger editions of humanity, dimes found it necessary to play cute, and they were good at it. *Give me a chance to clean myself up—how I must stink!* Juko thought. *Not that Alice is a bouquet of freshness herself.*

The clan mothers taped Juko's story at the yurt, and did not love her for raging against her own people. They did not love her for being vulnerable and child-sized and clever with words. They only began to love her, slowly and cautiously over the next few days, when she spoke about the *Maïdo*, and what it might accomplish for the sake of a dream that was beyond all war and politics.

The dead hero's name was Hong. At next Sunday's chapel meeting, his soul turned down the opportunity to be copied into Juko's brain, and incarnate into a female dime body. Afterward Alice preached to the crowd in that little foamstone dome, and thanks to her, Juko was not put in jeopardy a second time, no matter how many snomo souls sat waiting on the shelf.

She had a future again, and those who'd been careful not to grow fond of her suddenly turned friendly after

the service. They admired her "gumption," an old English word she had to look up in Alice's dictionary. Juko worked all the harder, calculating and persuading.

Alice slid off Bucephalus's back with Juko in her arms, then set the dime down onto her feet. Weeks of wind had weathered the great awning that sheltered the *Maïdo*. Its color was true dust-red now, not just a camouflage imitation.

They scuttled under its shade. Isaac saw and waved. "We got buzzed again yesterday evening. Dimes sure are curious. They know we've got their floater. It worries them what we're doing with her."

"What are we doing with her?" Juko asked. "Batteries, solar panels, foodstocks; all loaded in. The pulleys and winches and propellers all work. It's stupid to wait, now that the kittens have opened their eyes. My people will decide to strafe the *Maïdo* just for the hell of it. And hope things quiet down like they did after the *Šikago* raid."

"Things *haven't* quieted down. We're just taking our time," Alice said. "They'll find that out. There's going to be lots of noise, and you've chosen to make some yourself. They won't love you, you know. You and your mad idea that dimes and snomos should work together! They'll call you all the worst names—"

"They'll give me a hearing, all the cities but Adamstown," Juko responded. "They'll give me a pulpit to preach from, and be as crazy as I like, as long as the *Maïdo* works, and we manage to fly her. Because if we do that, then our crew of three snomos and one dime share a technology that they'll want to master."

"To steal," Isaac said.

Juko shrugged. "You're right. And they'll dismiss me as a snomo lover and a meat-eater, as soon as they've copied our tricks. What can I do about that? Tell them that meat tastes good? Humankind was edited into different varieties to supply each others' needs, not to go to war, but sometimes I think this planet was made for war."

"Preach anyhow," Alice said. "Preach partnership. But first find out if your tricks work. There's a lot of difference between computer simulations and reality."

"Have you two chosen the crew?" Isaac asked.

"You're on, don't worry," Alice told him. "She's really ready, then? You've got that canard rig working? That's what I'm here to find out. The clan mothers are meeting again tonight."

"We're champing at the bit. High summer's just around the corner, the best time for us to sail around the world, talking peace to any dime airplanes that buzz us," Isaac answered. "Tell them it'll be glorious, and it'll be news, and soon everyone will be cheering, and all the old wars will be forgotten."

"My God! You *have* caught Juko's disease, haven't you?" Alice laughed.

"He's worse than me," Juko said. "But I hope he's right. Why live forever confined to all the grim old cycles? It's better to cross our fingers and take the risk."

She paused, and thought to herself. *And see a new landscape at long last.* ♦

# Proxy

John W. Randal

She opened her eyes, and it was as if she had just materialized there. The scene came up around her—all wet gloom and hissing night color.

"... So you want close-check this out, and *think* before sign," buzzed the stall lawyer.

Kari nodded, jerkily brushing the dark line of a damp and wiry braid back behind one ear. She took the document. Her plastic coat rustled like the rain falling outside the rickety fiberboard law stall. The operator was a gnarled oriental wearing a biorespirator. He hardly looked human.

Color flicked, like a jittery clockwork insect, fluttering as



Illustration by Bob Walters

it dies: a faulty fluorescent light, suspended precariously above the little lawyer's rounded head. Its failing illumination lapped his skin from dark to dead pale.

Kari felt loose and disconnected. Shakily adrift.

From somewhere in the back of the shabby booth came the crackle of imported skin-bot rap. The music was a thin static of tin treble—knotted and spitting like a frayed wire.

Unreal. Twisted.

She just stood there, holding the paper. Her emotions were jammed—stuck in a loop, like the affected rhythm of the skin-bot song. The little lawyer watched Kari, his moist eyes hidden behind smeared scleral shells. The two of them seemed frozen—shadowed figures like robots in a play, waiting for cues. The reflection of the law stall's sign in the glistening street was a dirty pink. The undercarriage of an electric car sparked white as it slicked by. Distant sirens sang red.

Steam from a nearby sewer wafted artfully between Kari and the law stall. It stank of rich metallic decay, underlaid with overripe fruit. Peaches.

Such a small thing. But like a pebble tossed into the spinning wheel of a gyroscope, it deflected the mechanics of the moment. The groove jerked and wavered.

Kari blinked, took an unsteady step backward.

Thin rain lined down like vague video static. The lawyer, with his wetly opaque eyes, bloomed and receded in the fluttering of the bad light. *Unreal.*

Kari stared down at the paper in her hand. She thought of Tommy—thought *around* Tommy. But it didn't help.

She took a shuddery gulp of the humid air, shoulders hitching. Her head hurt, and she suddenly felt distantly ill. With a mumbled "Thanks," she left the stall. The little lawyer didn't watch her go; he just stared at the empty space where she had been. Kari's heels clacked distinctly on the wet pavement—senseless little sounds. The brown-glow sky continued to dump its hissing burden. . . .

The soft curve of her smooth skin: silk and cream. Upon it, his hand runs warmly. They rustle, flesh against flesh, sigh and slide together. From perfect velvety bodies, deep light pulses.

Soft gold and orange.

His lips on hers, taste. Her hands hold him tight.

Moments, as thick and languid as hot honey, flow through and back—echoing, replaying in sensuous loops. All around, flakes of glimmering color drift down, endlessly. It builds but never ends, and peaks forever in a flare of white.

He holds her. And they're like gods entwined within the sun. Moving.

And it's white and white and white . . .

"Fifty K—but if you have the standard insurance it should be covered." His name is Coring or Corling or something; he told her but she forgot. Like the man, the name made little impression—just a voice and moving pictures.

But his home office is nice. Cutting edge, pristine and sharp—all the newest gear. Business must be good.

"You sure you can't get him out to sign? A girl like

you . . ." Coring/Corling smiles suggestively as he takes the form from her pale hand.

Kari doesn't react. It's like getting flirted with by a toaster. "Tommy hasn't come out for a year and a half," she says, staring at the tinted window (everything's cheery and bright out there—at least when seen through the carefully colored plastic). "He's got an automatic draw on his account and an auto-nurse that comes on-line twice a week to check him out."

Coring/Corling nods with professional sympathy, steeping his fingers and pursing perfectly engineered lips. "He's in Gloriana, isn't he?"

Dry eyes jerked back to the man by his question, Kari says, "Yes." A brief reply—tight and empty. Her head hurts. She hasn't slept now in *how* long?

"That's a popular one . . ."

The words just hang there, blindly.

"Stimtime addiction is actually quite common." The Proxy shifts a bit in his cushioned chair, looking at Kari from a slightly different angle. It's as if he's framing and posing her against some mental background that only he can see. He smiles again. "Some folks just can't handle reality. Proxies get hired to go in all the time—for lots of reasons." His smooth face mirrors sympathy and understanding.

Kari just stares at him. Her head aches.

"But you'll have it signed—or, I mean, authorized—by Monday?" she asks. The dull throb at her temples beats with her pulse.

"Oh, yes, certainly by then." Coring/Corling smiles.

"Three days and you'll be a free agent!"

Again, there is nothing to say. Monday.

They had met on a Monday. It was the best way he'd ever started a week, Tommy used to say. Back when he still talked.

Coring/Corling is waiting: a professionally timed moment of silence for the bereaved client. There's a slight rash around the platinum link-jack behind his left ear. He's rubbing clear salve on it with one stubby finger.

Kari's eyes blankly track that pink digit, slithering in the oil. Then she blinks, clears her throat. "By Monday, then," she states, and stands. Clenched.

The Proxy nods in self-important confirmation.

And gives her a flash of bonded ivories. . . .

Moving with the flow-pattern of the evening crowds.

Heading home. Now that it is done—or at least commissioned—Kari feels utterly blank.

"Just a little paperwork," she says to herself, with a soft hitch in her voice. She is studiously ignored by the rumpled mass of people around her.

Traffic whines and coughs on the clotted street. She smells the tang of internal combustion and electricity: the scent of movement machinery. World-gears.

Kari's watch informs her that a rain shower is predicted to commence in five point seven minutes. She ignores the tiny artificial voice.

A small store squats to Kari's left. Amid the standard glow-sheet ads declaring the newest job and living-space openings, the store's front window carries a display of



cheap paper TVs. All of them are tuned to fizzing static. Nearby, little kids wearing graffiti-smeared UV goggles (that mean old sun can make you blind!) are playing around a fuming air pole. They greedily suck the processed oxygen like a cluster of oddly colored leeches.

The crowd carries her along in its powerfully predictable flow. Kari moves with it, unthinking. On automatic. Above the teeming streets, a huge ad-sail floats. Upon its metallic surface phosphor-green words flow:

IS YOUR FORMER LOVED ONE NOT LIVING UP TO HIS/HER/ITS SHARE OF THE HIGH COST OF DOUBLE-OCCUPANCY LIVING? WELL, CUT THOSE LEGAL CORDS AND CUT YOURSELF FREE! COME SEE THE NEW—AND INEXPENSIVE—SINGLE-CELL APARTMENTS AT EASTGATE. WE KNOW WHAT YOU NEED.

There's a hunched figure, vomiting onto the discolored plastic sidewalk. But he's registered—it's okay. The government junkie implant glitters at his dirty throat. If you want it, and can pay, they'll feed it to you. Kari can't take her eyes off the puker for a very long time. She's shaking.

The darkening sky tentatively trembles, and begins to spatter the rush hour with greasy drizzle. People reflexively break out their raingear: a motley assortment of colors and plastic hues. Kari doesn't even check her watch. It's right on time.

The people around her don't seem to have any hidden pain inside them, no crying aches. All their faces are carefully blank, smooth with that generic social mask. Kari watches them to stop from thinking about Tommy. But in every face she sees him.

*Whatever you want, they'll feed it to you.*

She had actually tried it with him at first, once or twice. It hadn't been that bad—that glowing world, summoned up inside your head from math and electricity. But it was just programming, in the end. Just pretty programming.

Except for people like Tommy.

The ad-sail, drifting slowly around the worn corner of a wire-wreathed building, flicks to a new subject:

MIND-NET: THINGS CAN ALWAYS BE BETTER. GIVE US A TRY. YOU WON'T BE DISAPPOINTED. . . .

Kari sniffs, rubs her nose. The oily rain trickles warmly over her scalp. Don't think about it, she tells herself. Don't think at all now—it's better if you don't.

Forget that reality.

Before her on the street, a red sign comes on. The crowd holding Kari stops. A melange of battery- and gasoline-powered cars rushes by in a blur of dented chrome and plastic. The sign turns green.

Kari moves on. . . .

In the apartment, Tommy twitches: a slick spasm, like a galvanized frog leg.

From the small flesh-colored box, skin-glued to his skull, snakes a velvety cable. It runs darkly across the shadowed floor and rises up to couple blindly with their home terminal. Kari perches on the edge of a ratty futon, trying to talk to him. Her voice is pitched with strain:

“. . . And—I got the papers—the release form.

Joni says I can stay with her until it's all processed and they . . . assign me a new place.” Her smudged eyes flick redly around the small room. Anywhere but at him. Memories are layered over every surface, as thick as dust. “I have to free up my accounts,” Kari bleakly adds, her gaze empty. “I can't live like this. . . .”

A ceiling fan kicks rhythmically through the dim air. Kari turns her head away from where he lies, steals a little shaky breath. “It's all legal,” she says defensively. “You have to sign them, I—”

She twists her slender fingers together, blinking brightness. Her eyes track to the box on his head, the dirty pink color. It looks like it should be a part of a doll—not a person. Kari can't stop; she *has* to look at his gaunt face.

And Tommy, in pale skin, jerks and smiles. A bit of drool at the lip . . .

Coring snakes a thin smile as the cool plug clicks in. An interference sizzle, all blue-white and foamy, shimmers within his mind for a second. Then he's into the smooth gray of the Mind-Net menu. And from there, into Gloriana.

In the prismatically perfect artificial world, Coring picks a persona and moves it through the dreamy landscape with a series of intricate and swift mental commands. His navigational skills are impressive. They ought to be.

He's been doing this for years. It's good work.

Coring doesn't think much about addicts. They're just weak little non-things. Hardly there at all for him—and certainly not real in any hard way. They're almost kind of funny, pathetic.

You see, you just can't unplug them from their various computer-generated stuntime worlds. The interface breach-scramble does some *permanent* trauma to the neurons when that happens. And a good portion of the poor losers don't want to be unplugged anyway.

That's where the Proxies come in. They are the link (legally binding) to the outside world. Some of the wealthier addicts manage their entire fortunes from stuntime, via a staff of hand-picked Proxies. Coring's practice is more modest than that—but still quite profitable. Addiction has been good to him.

Coring chuckles. If people could just unhook stim-junkies cold, he wouldn't have a job. The constant exposure to the simulated environments does tend to give him the occasional headache—but what the hell.

He loves his work.

With another smile, Coring opens a tracer window, beginning his search for Tommy—or at least what *serves* as Tommy in this creamy, synthetic world. He ignores the drippingly sensual input of Gloriana, concentrating on the job.

The Proxy's actions are smooth and precise. His grace is almost machinelike in its utter cold skill. . . .

The fan sweeps rhythmically around, cutting time.

Kari watches it silently. Her bags are packed and loaded in the auto-taxi down on the street. It's costing her fifty dollars every ten minutes for the wait—but she just can't leave him until it is done.

The headache has sunk sullenly deep into her skull. It's not very bad, just a vague shadow-pain. Sometimes Kari thinks that she'll have it forever. There's a reclining form, on the far edge of her vision, that Kari wants to look at. But she keeps her eyes rigidly away.

Don't think about it. Just wait. It'll be over—soon.

It'll end.

But the fan sweeps, her head pulses, and she wonders.

The apartment's single window is toned all the way up, giving the room a glaring, overexposed appearance. Too gritty, too real and shabby to look at steadily. Kari closes her eyes with a dry sigh. Dust settling onto dead grass.

Dimly, through the thin recycled metal of the apartment walls, she hears the surreal sounds of traffic and technology from the busy streets below.

Tommy had held her when her father died. The pain and utter emptiness had torn great sobbing tears from Kari, then. And Tommy had held her, tight, close. "He had been her only anchor—the only point of contact in a suddenly huge and distant world. He had held her. . . .

The blades of the fan cut around.

Kari doesn't look. She can't. There should be more hurt, like with her father. But there isn't—only silence and ash. Settling.

They had been happy together. They had been good. Tommy and she had gotten their lives into a smooth groove. A steady, upward spin.

And then Tommy had started jacking into Gloriana. Once or twice a week, just to "add some shine" to their life. It was a little thing. A tiny darkening.

But the spin wavered. His dependence on stuntime grew. And things fell apart.

Kari's face is paper-pale in the harsh light. She's wearing dark UV sunglasses and clothing—like at a funeral. Like mourning. . . .

Velvet over silk, warm and soft.

Round and taut in his strong hand, the fruit whispers as he slowly runs it over her lean stomach. Its rich crimson and orange fuzz slides deliciously over her bare skin. She arches her body. His lips touch her.

A slow flood of glowing color flows over them. High-lights are picked out in undulating flesh tones, shadows sink down in warm black. He bites the peach, and sweet juice runs out. Their lips mingle it; it slicks them up. Arms and legs hold, pale flesh is rubbed and fondled. Soft sighs and movement.

And the room is all vague sweeps of smooth fabric, pillows of intimately yielding fluff, and gracefully drifting snowflakes. The intricate crystals are warm to the touch, and they melt into subtle perfume as they drift down upon moving flesh. Colors run like water.

Off to the side, there's a sculpted bowl of peaches; rounded curves of sensual promise.

He reaches languidly for another.

"Dear Sir," whispers a soft, childlike voice.

Lifting his face from the lush warmth of her body, he sees a luminous cherub drifting in the scented air, its toylike wings fluttering in a flickering blur. It smiles sweetly.

"You must relinquish your hold on that one," the cherub says, pointing a chubby little porcelain finger at the bitten peach, "before you can have another, dear Sir."

Below him, she sighs, runs her hands up along his bare sides. Her moist lips touch his throat. He smiles at the cherub, at the drifting color.

"Do you wish to give me that peach?" the cherub softly asks. It drifts to and fro. Smiling.

"Sure," he murmurs, holding up the fruit to the little being. It daintily takes the peach in both tiny hands. In the stray flicker of white light from the cherub's fluttering wings, the man notes that the small creature's pale eyes seem to be blind. A little thing. A small detail.

It bothers him for a moment. But then the light flows, and the cherub smiles again and hands him a fresh peach.

"Enjoy, dear Sir," it coos. And then it's gone, in a sparkle of black-and-white flower petals.

She draws him to her. Sighs. He runs the smooth fruit down between her breasts. They kiss.

Off to the side, the small delicate bowl rests. The rounded cluster of peaches within it shows warm color, darkening ever so slightly.

In the perfumed air: a slight hint of rot. . . .

In the apartment, Tommy twitches.

Kari looks at him for a moment. She's standing by the window now—can't seem to sit any more. Everything about her is tight and coiled.

"You used to hold me," she whispers.

He lies there like furniture.

The stuntime interface unfolds from Coring's persona, like the hyper-real petals of some mathematical flower. The colors are pixel-sharp and glowing, in neon sweeps.

A smooth piece of work.

Coring permits himself a brief smile. With the utmost finesse he has inserted the request into part of the ambient reality of Tommy's stuntime fantasy.

Any other Proxy would've opted for the quicker, and less tricky, direct intervention mode. Not Coring. They don't call him the best for nothing.

He summons the Gloriana Monitor.

A sexless, chromium head extrudes from a sweeping curve of mauve. "Active," states the mirrored bust.

"Assess," snaps Coring, a bit sharply. He has no patience in dealing with limited AIs. He spends enough time working in their various artificial realities as it is—talking to them is a chore he likes to keep to a minimum. "Legality."

"Nine nine point nine nine five," replies the Monitor.

"Done," says Coring. And he blinks out of the Gloriana interface like a snuffed candle.

The vid screen in the apartment pinks on, startling Kari. It shows Coring by his jazzy terminal. He's pulling a glossy wire, plugged in gold, out of the jack behind his ear.

"Well, that's that," he says, with a blandly hot smile. "You should be getting the hard copy any second now."

The printer clicks on and begins hissing. Her body moves without thought, as if it had been programmed ahead of time. Kari tears off the Relationship Release form and faces the screen stiffly. "That's it, then?" she asks. The paper is so light . . . flimsy.

"Yep. Maybe you'll look me up some time," says the Proxy, smiling.

"Right," mutters Kari, snapping off the connection.

She turns and looks at Tommy, for a long, motionless time. She looks at him for *real*. Things well up. . . .

And then—

Time has passed. She's staring up at the sluggish fan upon the ceiling. It's not any different.

How much is the cab charge now—six, seven hundred dollars?

Kari's gaze drifts down to Tommy. He looks small. She feels hollow, unreal. Her kiss on his machine-shaved cheek: dry—like her eyes.

It's not any different at all.

She thought that she would feel something more than this—

Emptiness.

But it's the same. The same as the last year and a half of her life with Tommy. Now that it is done, she finds it even harder to think around him. That big emptiness threatens to swell up and out of her. But she won't cry here; she promised herself that.

"That's not me. It's not real," Kari says to him. "I can't touch you at all any more."

The only response she gets is the faint, constant hum of the box glued to Tommy's head. The soft purr of the electric world he's now living in. Kari looks up and around the tiny room one more time, blinking rapidly.

*Nothing but machines.*

She leaves the apartment with the Relationship Release form clutched and crinkled in her black-gloved hand. . . .

The bar of cast light slowly softens and slides across the room. Regulators hiss and click. The auto-nurse comes online for a moment, runs a diagnostic scan, and then shuts itself off. Tommy breathes and twitches.

The spin wavers.

Half submerged within the shadows clotted upon the ceiling, the fan's rhythmic cycle stutters a bit. In response, perhaps, to some drain or fluctuation in the overburdened city power grid, the dim blades whir down silently, flicking from light to dark. Light to dark.

Slowing. Stopping finally.

Beneath the humming box, Tommy frowns slightly. Then deeper. His thin body uncomfortably shifts.

And his heavy eyes open sluggishly, blinking up at the motionless fan.

"Kari?" he questions, through a rusty throat.

But it's dark now.

And she's gone. ♦

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# Goldilocks and the Virtual Bears



W. Gregory Stewart

- I (Hoop-la, hoop-la!  
Time for the story  
of Goldilocks and  
the Virtual Bears.  
Sit right down and strap  
right in  
and prick your ears,  
friends, up  
and over my way!)
- II Goldilocks (Goldi,  
sweet little thing,  
survivor of the last

Illustration by Ron Walotsky

Madonna Massacre during  
 the Night of the Killer Wannabes,  
 just another innocent  
 (or nearly so, or not so) victim of  
 the Monster Concert for  
 the Lloyd Thaxton Memorial Star Search  
 Alumni Night Karaoke Spectacular  
 and the resultant Pop Mimesis. Remember?  
 Madonnas and Marilyns everywhere,  
 torpedo-tit bimbi  
 vamping down Broadway,  
 among legions of valiant Princes,  
 and Michaels in various  
 stages of evolution,  
 and Hammers and whoever and  
 off with their bits! and sundry . . .  
 night of the Cher-beasts  
 night of the Bowie-boys  
 night of the Judy Gar-goils  
 night of the Tiny Timoids  
 (but they didn't do much).  
 Oh yes, oh yes — that was the night  
 that Goldi got out of town for good  
 (in chain-link bustier and blonding,  
 recent victim of nerve-murder  
 and waiting for nothing  
 to start *or* stop)  
 looking for a hidey in a dark place  
 not quite as urban  
 or sub-urban)  
 looking for someplace to go,  
 someplace in the 'Kills, maybe,  
 'til it all 'til it all 'til it all  
 turned OFF shut DOWN got SANE AGAIN,  
 whatever that was  
 (and even today some blame it on cable,  
 and some on irradiated grapes;  
 all we can know for sure is that  
 Divine was dead and Johnny, off the air . . .)

So — little Goldi running. Where?  
 Into the dark woods, into the places  
 rangers and corporate raiders avoid.  
 Into the woodbine, into spaces  
 shunned by schiz- and paran-oid.

(. . . and please, no cutesy rhyme or  
 'Hallmark' verse; nothing that might  
 be described as 'nice' . . . ok, sorry,  
 let's get on with it.)

- III Here is a sweet little house in the forest —  
 stucco of wall and thatch of roof,  
 shutter of window and Dutch of door,  
 and up on top a weather vane  
 depicting a Catholic Pope in the woods . . .  
 this (for those of you who do not  
 SEE IT COMING) is the home of the three  
 Virtual Bears:

Ursa Mater, or Mama Bear;  
 Ursa Miner, or Black Lung Bear, Provider Bear —  
 the Papa, yes; and  
 Ursa Dex, or Poindexter, Little Nerd, Weenie Bear,  
 issue of the happy union.

(But whither Virtuality, and by what virtue Virtual,  
 werden Sie wirklich, hey? I'm glad you asked . . .)

Here is How It Happened:

1. First, Bears Discovered Fire;
- 2a. next, Bears Discovered Brussels sprouts,  
 but only briefly.
- 2b. Then Bears discovered fax and taxes
3. and a few other things; in time,
4. Bears Discovered Virtual Reality,
5. and plugged in for good.

Meanwhile, back at our mainline . . .)

Here's what Goldilocks found inside:  
 it wasn't cottage-of-the-month.

Bears are worse than bachelors,  
 neat-and-tidywise;  
 worse than frat-guys, worse  
 than your crazy Uncle Louie  
 before they got his medication right —

well, you got the idea of what it wasn't —  
 clean. the idea of what it wasn't —  
 clean. what it wasn't —  
 clean. what it wasn't —  
 clean. (and with a scratched record  
 on the turntable — bears  
 never went CD, because bears  
 had too much tied up in  
 extensive LP collections.)

- IV fuzz in the kitchen, green fuzz, brown fuzz —  
 fuzz in the dining room, yellow and blue —  
 fuzz on the ceiling, fuzz in the bathtub —  
 fuzz in the fireplace, flyin' up the flue!

(damn! sorry . . .)

we're not just talking mess, here —  
 we're talking filth. filth squared.  
 hyperfilth. let us employ  
 the pizza perspective:

- A. an empty, clean and greaseless  
 pizza box is only a mess.
- B. pizza box with dead and greasy pizza parts =  
 protofilth.
- C. pizza box w/parts *and* fuzz =  
 filth getting out of hand.
- D. pizza etc. w/fuzz growing over the sides  
 of the box like creeping charlie or

dishwasher suds doing bad comedy =  
filth as it develops self-awareness  
and an instinct for survival.

- E. Give it a week, and make the pizza  
anchovy and onion, and you get  
sentient filth that can learn  
to walk erect  
and make crude tools.

And where are the bears, you want to know?  
In the den? Too easy.  
In the rumpus room, rumping? Getting warmer.

Bears — these bears, at any rate, as well  
as most of their friends and all of their neighbears —  
had special VR's — Virtual Rooms — for  
Turning on, Tuning in, Turnips and Tuna,

- V which is where Goldilocks found the Bears,  
hooked up and oblivious  
to her blonde and perky presence,  
happily humming show tunes,  
strapped in and totally alternate,  
with digital waldos on fingers and toes,  
and video goggles just over the nose,  
(NOW CUT THAT OUT!)

catheterized and mechanically cosseted,  
chasing geometric Jovian bees back back  
back to the MASTER HIVE,  
where — oh, you know,  
after facing and vanquishing  
various bear-foes — Xeno-bears,  
Killer Comb-Wasps and whatnot —  
they get a taste of STAR HONEY, actualized  
when the tube in 'twixt their lips  
delivers a dose — a dollop, a glug,  
a veritable heaping helping —  
from a vat of something glutinous  
and sweet. And fuzzy. And warm.  
(Yes —  
you ARE ok. and so am I.  
it's your Uncle Louie I'm worried about . . .)

- VI OK — on and on and on until.  
Abrupt change-up, sans segue.

It had taken the United Nations about 13 years  
to decide to grant observer nation status  
to Bears — and then not until  
Winston Pooh's immortal and impassioned plea  
before the General Assembly.  
Bears came out of the closet, then, though, you bet!  
(Years of trying to pass as human —  
reeking of depilatories (the back  
is the hardest to reach and this  
should explain certain  
people from whom you may  
have recoiled at the beach),

corseted, and constantly  
pretending to be gruff and surly,  
just to day labor or cabby, just  
to work a lay-away  
on the necessary Virtual stuff —  
ended in standing ovation for one of their own  
on the world stage . . . well,  
the life of Bears changed immediately but not  
always for the better . . .)

Here is what Bears got:  
separate but equal;  
affordable housing w/utilities included;  
job training;  
ignored.

And here is what Bears got that Goldi wanted to get:  
affordable housing w/utilities included;  
ignored.

## VII Chapter Seven, In Which Goldilocks Sets Her Sights

Goldi falls in love with the Bears'  
dear little cottage, and with the neighborhood —  
quiet, convenient to shopping and churches,  
and with a certain Old World charm.

So Goldi moves in —  
and we'll move this along.

Goldi moves in, cleans up, and does  
a little necessary remodeling  
("a wonderful first fixer-upper") — she walls  
the Bears off entirely — except for tubes —  
bricking in the VR like  
a Poe rewrite for television,  
locking them away with

1. hardware
2. software
4. firmware
8. wetware

16. bearware on the fullword boundary

and embedding nested ifs like ostriches,  
whatever that means. This  
is what it did, though:

it took the Reality Level that the Bears  
ran originally and re-initialized it  
inside a level inside a level inside a level  
and ending up where they started —  
they never got up-and-out again,  
without getting trapped *inside* inside,  
and if they weren't doing Virtual,  
it was hiber-time, and they ended up  
happily ever after,  
and always in the loop.  
Inputted, outputted,



fed and drained forever — Goldi kept  
the vat of sweet glutinous  
full of warm fuzzy  
(and just how IS Uncle Louie doing?)  
and drained  
the Bears into the garden — you'll recall  
the Catheters, Willa and de Medici.

eating my/sitting in/sleeping —  
someone's rewritten my reality,  
and here she is, living my life,"  
because they have no idea.  
Ever.  
Again.  
At all.

Goldi does ever after, too,  
cashing in on the Madonna thing  
at Cubs' and Kids' birthdays, and later on  
at Elks' Conventions and for the PTA —  
although she never has children herself,  
never spawns,  
never tries to swim upstream.  
She never marries — doesn't want to.  
But sometimes she works Vegas.

And the Bears never say, "Someone's been

VIII commensal, n. (from L., *com*, with, and  
*mensa*, table):

1. one who eats at the same table.
2. an organism that lives or associates  
with another for mutual support or  
advantage, and not parasitically.
3. your Uncle Louie.

now go to sleep. ♦



WHEN MAD SCIENTISTS ARE "OUT"

# Merging Forever With the Dolowei

Joyce K. Jensen

Shua awakes in the dark, cooed in blankets. *Woman*, she tells herself, *you're getting old*, for sleep only comes to her now in fits and starts. Outside the celebration is drawing to a close and the women—for there are mostly women here—are going home. As the laughter and singing flit away along the wind, Shua's dreams dissipate too.

With one strong arm, the brown skin sagging from the still-firm muscles, she levers herself off the pallet (hip grinding in protest), gropes for the oil lamp, and strikes a light. A rodent darts away from the sudden illumination, its night's work interrupted. *Ab, well*, Shua thinks, *soon the little creature will have the house to itself*.

Shua exchanges her tunic for jacket and breeches. In her pack are the fine new trousers and shirt made of the rare, soft, resilient skin of abaji birds. Beadwork in the shape of wings spans the shoulders and back. Many years ago she saw the huge, flightless birds on an island far out in the ocean.

She laces her boots carefully, for it is bad luck if the laces cross in the wrong direction. On an ordinary day she would laugh at such superstitions, but today she leaves noth-



Illustration by Debbie Hughes

ing to chance. Finished, she carries the lamp into the outer room. She is glad for the presence of the tiny rodent because two whole rooms are too much for one old soldier. It will be good to canter away and leave the house behind—she looks forward to freedom from the burden of so much prosperity.

She checks her gear one last time, though everything has been ready since before the celebration. *Has it been only four days? It seems like seasons, ages.* She's eager to be on the trail, heading for the Great Stone Calendar. There, in formal rites, the war that has been waged intermittently for all the centuries people have lived on this planet will end. Though each generation of Shua's people has taken sacred vows never to do so, they are about to merge with the Doloweï, the Khikel, and the Maruta. Shua is bitter. Didn't their ancestors come here to escape everything the Doloweï stand for? Soon that will be forgotten, like all the old ways. She sighs from deep inside, but it does not release the pain.

The sun is coming up. Shua opens the door and pushes the sacking back from the window to greet it. The fading moons huddle together like tired revelers. All is quiet.

Shua pulls a large basket down from a high shelf. From it she lifts blankets, spare clothing, her winter parka, until she finds at the bottom the package she prepared so carefully the previous night. She tucks it in her shirt, puts out the lamp.

Now she crosses the village, padding silently between the houses, down the artisans' lane, past the red embers of the bonfire. The village is surrounded by a stockade of timbers, hewn to points. Outside the enclosure, fields and pastures spread across the valley. Since the threat of war has passed, there are even houses outside—unthinkable a few seasons ago.

The sorceress's hut sits near the inner wall, which surrounds the big mound at the north end of the stockade. On a pole in the yard, the carcasses of the mock-hares Shua brought yesterday are curing. Scents both sweet and acrid rise from the herb garden. Magic signs—the pod shapes of the ancient ships, human pictographs, sacred octagons—are painted around the door and window. Shua announces herself; a voice bids her enter.

The sorceress crouches in front of a shallow bowl; fire in the bowl casts shadows in the valleys of her face. Shua kneels down from her.

"What have you brought?" asks the sorceress.

"This." Shua pulls the package from her belt and unfolds it with infinite care, for it holds the things that matter most to her in this world. The sorceress examines them one by one. The first is a tooth that belonged to the familiar of a god, given to Shua by a Doloweï warrior she vanquished when she was little more than a girl. It is as long as her hand, curved like a sickle, heavy as a rock. In exchange for the tooth, she spared the warrior's life.

The next treasure is a knuckle bone, the only part of her lover Rous she still possesses. Shua's heart pounds, for she fiercely desires that the sorceress won't choose it. When the sorceress lays it back on the leather, Shua breathes again.

The sorceress weighs the last item in her hand—a pair

of entwined copper necklaces. From each hangs a jade pendant as wide as her palm. The necklaces were given to Shua and Rous on their wedding day, a gift from the chief Shua had served faithfully for many years. Engraved on one pendant is a profile with a blunt chin and high forehead—that is Shua. On the other is Rous, with her straight nose and powerful jaw. When Rous died, Shua had the necklaces linked so they couldn't be unjoined. So long as they remain joined, she is willing to part with them.

"These," the sorceress says, examining the pendants again. She passes them across the fire four times, chanting. Then: "What is it that you want?"

"Safe passage through Khikel territory to the Great Calendar," Shua says.

"What else?"

"That we don't lose control of our ancestral lands, and that the girl Jev isn't forced to marry the lowlander."

"Follow these instructions." The sorceress hands her a red pouch. "Sprinkle this on the first meal Jev and the lowlander take together. Then she can't be forced into the marriage." Next, a blue pouch. "After you cross Bald River, chant the names of the Ten Sisters and offer this to them. That will guarantee safe passage." Finally she picks up a smooth, flat rock, sews it into a square of gray leather, seals it with wax. "Give this to Jev as a nuptial gift."

Shua wonders what magic the stone holds, but knows a question would receive no reply. She thanks the sorceress and leaves, trudging across the hard earth to the gate of the inner stockade. A slave, crouching by the gate, jumps up and makes the signal; the gate is pulled open from within. Up the ladder Shua goes to the first level of the mound, up another ladder to the top. Her knee starts to buckle, a nuisance. The lower mound was built when she was a child; she herself carried basketloads of dirt, tugging mightily to hand them along the line like the grown-ups. The name of the woman who was chief then springs to mind: Eleni. Shua's grandmother was one of the elders. How magnificent the mound had seemed as it rose over the grave of the old chief. Now Eleni, too, is dust, and the old mound has become the platform for the new mound on which the present chief, Hedi, dwells.

Jev is waiting at the top. Jev is Rous's granddaughter; as if to remind Shua of that fact, Jev turns her head a certain way exactly as Rous did. "Grandmother Shua," she says, "you didn't need to come all the way up. I'd have met you below."

"No way for a proper guard, Jev," she says, offended.

They descend the ladders, go out the inner gate, cross the compound. "Even the servants get to sleep today," Jev complains. "Everybody but you and me."

"Young people don't need much sleep," Shua says.

"Old people don't get much sleep even if they need it."

Hedi and the women of the council will leave later in the day but will arrive at the Doloweï city first, for Jev must stop at the shrine of the Mother on the way.

The Khikel eunuch Pali, gone to fat, waits at the outer gate. He was bought as a starving boy; now age lines deepen on his amiable face. The equinae are pawing the ground with powerful forelegs. They have broad hooves,

thick necks, long faces as amiable as Pali's. They have been saddled, the gear loaded. Shua mounts, silently warning her knee to behave. They begin the journey.

A day's ride brings them to the shrine, which is old beyond imagining, a cube of a building, twice as high, twice as wide, twice as deep as the height of a tall woman. It nestles in a glade near the sacred grove, with a splendid view of the plains below. Three sides are of mottled stone; the fourth, the front, is open, supported by pillars. It is cool inside; at the back is a simple altar. There are no decorations. Shua goes back outside, listens to the insects hum as she dozes in the sunshine. Pali hums too as he starts a fire. Jev busies herself cleaning out the debris that has blown into the shrine during the winter.

Shua came here once before, eighteen or nineteen years ago, to fulfill the Mother's Dictum that all her people bear a child. She and half a dozen other women came and made the offerings. Then they crossed the plains to the walled city of the Dolowei to trade basketware, pottery, and dried fruit for Dolowei fabric, and to find fathers for their daughters.

At night around the campfire, the women argued about the best way to choose a father. "Capture a warrior!" Milla cried. "That is the only way. Then keep him prisoner until your child is conceived."

"No, no, you don't want your daughter conceived in anger," Leed protested. "The best way is to go to the temple of the Mother in the city. Then she will bless you."

Milla and one other went off to find a warrior. The rest rode on to the town. The gates were open, for at that time Shua's people and the Dolowei had a truce; the Maruta were their common enemy.

At the big temple of the Mother in the city, she offered the traditional gifts of wine and meal. The temple had private rooms for worship and quarters for the priests, but it was as simple inside as the ancient hillside shrine; the only adornments were the two gold disks representing the moons, which are the Mother's torches. One is Enlightenment, the other Procreation.

Leed worshiped with many men so her daughter would have many attributes. But Shua watched for days before singling out a tall man with a full dark beard. She followed him to a home where several children played within a garden. "Will you worship with me at the temple of the Mother?" she asked.

He looked at her intently. "If I do, when will the child be born?"

"In the full moons of the harvest cycle."

"What if it is a boy? Will you expose it?"

"Yes."

When he met her at the temple, he gave her an embroidered cloth. "I will send someone to the grove every day during harvest cycle," he said. "If the child dies or is a girl, leave the empty cloth. If a boy, wrap him in it so I can claim him."

She agreed. She and the man worshiped together several times, but she didn't ask his name. Every day he asked hers, however, until finally, reluctantly, she gave it to him: Shua, which means Self-Sufficient.

In time she returned home, but the child she gave birth to was a boy. Bitterly disappointed, she left him, wrapped in the embroidered cloth, in the sacred grove. She had fulfilled her duty and did not return to the town or the temple.

The next morning Jev makes prayers and offerings at the shrine; then they ride until evening, when they see the Dolowei town squatting in the distance where the rivers converge. A dozen villages have scattered outward from the city's walls.

They arrive after dark. Torchlight flickers in the crowded streets. The first time Shua was here the women peeked shyly out from behind gates and windows. Now the veils are gone and the women, though still swathed in skirts, move freely about the city among the men. Shua hurries to keep up with Jev.

Hedi and the other women of the Hill People councils fill one end of a big hall that reeks of smoke and incense. Dolowei women, faces smeared with white paint, clear away the banquet. They eye Shua and the others with what—Fear? Awe? Disdain? Perhaps it is envy.

Finally the headman stands. He is tall, clean-shaven, impressive, with impassioned eyes. The room falls silent. "We come together to declare an end to war from ocean to ocean," he cries. "Every nation and tribe has been summoned to the Great Calendar. New bonds will be forged, old feuds buried, lands united."

Shouts of affirmation fill the room. He raises a hand for silence. "Our forebears traveled together across the skies to make this land their home. We will travel together to become one people!"

Fiercely desiring that her people remain independent, Shua refuses to join the cheering, but the shouts go on and on until the headman restores silence. "At the rites, as a sign of good faith, my son Eshu will join with Jev, daughter of the Hill People, and our lands and generations will merge."

Eshu steps forward. Shua is disappointed—he's not nearly so magnificent as his father. Too much forehead. Shoulders broad but bony. A lank mustache trails to a blunt chin. Jev steps up to join him, so brown and strong that Shua's heart overflows with pride. The betrothed eye one another warily.

When the evening is over Shua follows Jev to her quarters. The two peoples laugh and talk as they leave the hall, mundane, ordinary chatter such as Shua never expected to hear between them in her lifetime. She sleeps across Jev's doorway, though such precautions are no longer necessary. Shua is a warrior, will always be a warrior, but in this time and place warriors are no longer needed.

The next morning the larger party departs the city as a body; Shua, Jev, Eshu her betrothed, the eunuch Pali, and Eshu's two servants follow at a distance. That evening Shua carries the bowls to Jev and Eshu, who don't seem to have much to talk about. She secretly sprinkles the powder from the sorceress's red pouch over the food, to release Jev from the obligation of this marriage.

The journey to the Great Stone Calendar is a long one. During the days the sun is hot but the wind chill—Wby

*don't the gods make up their minds?* Shua curses her plodding equina every time it steps in a hole and grinds Shua's hip against itself. The large caravan is dust in the distance. Soon their smaller party will veer off the caravan road, for Jev and Eshu have to visit shrines across the countryside. Conciliation is the byword, and no god is to go unprioritized.

Pali chats with the child who serves Eshu. The child keeps his distance from Shua, however, as if the warrior were a viper, and eyes Shua's sword suspiciously. Eshu's guard, a hot-blooded boy, rides off and hunts to alleviate his boredom.

As the days pass, Jev and Eshu slide from wary retorts to stiff pleasantries, then begin to exchange god-love. A natural outcome, Shua supposes, of visiting so many shrines.

"The equina goddess came down from Oldhome and brought the equinae in a tiny box," Jev says. "When the box was opened, they leapt out and ran in every direction. Tamath was jealous; he hurled rocks at the goddess and the holes they made caused the nine hundred Maruta lakes."

Eshu disagrees. "Equinae were gifts from the moon gods to Father Sun," he says. With a deft move he swings a leg over the pommel. Suddenly he is riding backwards. "His daughter Talvi gave them to humans for extra legs during the first famine, so that they could travel farther to hunt."

Jev shifts the reins and Shua knows what's coming. "Jev!" she warns, but in an instant the girl is standing on the back of her mount. "Jev, you'll fall and break your neck!"

Eshu struggles up to one knee but doesn't get any further, and Shua loudly curses the both of them. But they laugh, regain their seats and canter off.

A shrine every day or two. Certain open-air altars require a libation or burnt offering. At the temples, the ecclesiarchs demand more, depending on the prestige of their deity. The loads on the pack equinae grow noticeably lighter. Shua begins to suspect the world holds more gods than people, and that all gods are insatiable.

Jev and Eshu begin to have races, disappear for hours at a time to hunt, and continually engage in loud arguments about things like what the ancestors' ships were made of.

"Feathers," Jev insists, "for they must have had very large wings."

"And what were the wings made of?" Eshu demands. "Leather? Cloth? Metal?"

They laugh uproariously at the thought of wings made of metal. "No, stone!" Jev cries, and they laugh even harder. "I'll beat you to that well," she says, and they're off. They challenge each other to ever more dangerous tricks. Shua scolds them, they ignore her; the guard brings back game which Pali and the child cook or Jev and Eshu burn on altars. The days slide into sameness.

Shua grows weary of their antics, but Jev is, after all, Rous's granddaughter, and her fondness for the girl wins out. And there is something about Eshu, something which Shua cannot name, but it is almost as if she had known him before. That is, of course, impossible. One day, however, she discerns what it is: when he throws back his

head to laugh, he reminds her of her mother. Shua shakes her head impatiently. *Silly nonsense, old woman*, she tells herself. *The sun is getting to you.*

On a windy afternoon they reach Bald River, the boundary of Khikel territory. Pali is beside himself, for on the other side is the homeland he has not seen since childhood. He trots his equina up and down the bank, points out landmarks in the distance, chatters like a bird. Everyone has questions: Where's the crossing? How soon will they see a Khikel village? The child serving Eshu, convinced they will be captured and beheaded, sobs.

Shua doesn't pay much attention to any of it. The river is low for spring, so the crossing won't be difficult. The pack equinae are unloaded; she, Jev, Eshu, and the guard strip to the essentials and wade in, balancing bundles on their heads. Able to cross without losing their footing, they go back and forth until everything and everyone is safely on the other side. Even the child, who is afraid of water and has to be carried across, now sits calmly in the sun.

Pali starts a fire; they'll camp here tonight. Shua digs in her pack for the blue pouch from the sorceress, goes down to the river, extols the Ten Sisters and chants their names, sprinkles the powder over the water. She struggles back up the bank and drops on her blankets near the fire, more tired than she cares to admit.

She awakens to whispers in the dark. Jev is saying, "You're very pretty, Eshu." Giggles follow.

"Men can't be pretty," he whispers back, his voice as teasing as hers.

"You are."

They must think everyone is asleep. Shua can just make them out across the fire. Jev pulls Eshu's profile to her and kisses him quickly on the mouth. They giggle and kiss again.

Shua is revolted. She wants to grab Jev and slap her. She thinks of all the raids and battles and slaughter. Of Rous dying, impaled on a Dolowei spear, flailing her arms in agony. Shua wants to drive her dagger into both of them, slit the lowlander's throat, call down the revenge of the Mother. Instead she rolls over, deliberately making noise to shut them up. In the silence that follows, it is a very long time before she falls asleep.

The next day she says very little. And the next, and the next. Jev watches her out of the corner of an eye. Rous was Jev's age, about nineteen, when she honored the Mother's Dictum and had a child—Jev's mother Stin. Stin married Eleni's granddaughter, and that way Jev became a royal daughter. Shua feels sick at the thought of Rous's granddaughter being wed to a lowlander, and of her treating the vile insult like a joke.

Stin was half grown when Shua and Rous met. Rous was a potter, Shua a warrior, tough from years on the trail. It was Rous who convinced her to obey the Mother's Dictum.

"Your childbearing years are almost over," she reminded Shua when her own child, Stin, was grown. "Don't you want to please the Mother?"

Of course Shua wanted to please the Mother. She often longed for the company of a daughter. But it was a longing that was never to be fulfilled.

The days become monotonous. Jev and Eshu have

quieted down, although one day when Shua has nodded off in the saddle, she jerks awake to find Eshu riding behind Jev on the same equine. He is nuzzling Jev's neck and his hand has slipped up under the front of her blouse. Shua curses the sorceress.

They stop at a shrine dedicated to the foremost Khikel god, the Encompassing Spirit. Shua expected priests, finery, and ceremony, but the shrine is modest. Jev and Eshu approach all the shrines with respect, but today they seem particularly serious. They duck through the doorway, Jev carrying a mock-hare, Eshu the wine offering. Shua watches from outside as they pour the wine over the stone mouth of the statue representing the god. It is a crude statue, stained dark down the front from libations, with blunt, upraised arms. As if blessed by the god, Jev and Eshu kiss. Shua turns away.

That night she tosses and moans in her blankets. She wakes suddenly, startled to see the man who fathered her son leaning over her in the dark. "What are you doing here?" she asks.

"I brought some water, Grandmother," he says. It isn't the man, but Eshu; he addresses Shua with the same respectful title her own people use. When she drifts back into sleep, she dreams about the time she met Rous, a peaceful time. But the dream shifts, and she is back at that miserable morning after she has given birth. When the midwife prepares her son to be put out as the Mother requires, Shua insists on carrying him to the grove herself, hoping the man will do as he promised. She makes a nest of leaves and grass for the sleeping child and lays him in it. What if the man doesn't care for his son after all? After a long time she leaves. She never knows what becomes of the child.

Today Shua experiences a bout of dizziness, and weakness comes and goes in her right arm; she could not lift her sword if she had to. Her vision comes and goes too, but she convinces herself it is only fatigue. In the afternoon she awakes in the saddle, her mount ambling peacefully, to see Jev and Eshu's equines tethered near a stand of trees. The others have gone on ahead. At first Shua thinks this another shrine, but she catches the flash of bodies in the foliage and realizes Jev and Eshu are making love. The bile rises in her throat, the glare of the sun makes her dizzy; suddenly she is confused. "Who is that in the trees, Rous?" she asks.

"It is you and I, Shua. You have been away on a long campaign and we will soon be reunited."

The next day they stop on a bluff, awed by the grandeur of the Great Calendar below. It sits atop a huge circular mound in the center of the flat brown plain. At the foot of the mound, temporary villages have sprung up. Years before Shua was here for a festival and was amazed at the size of the village. But there are ten times, a hundred times more people here now—Hill People, Dolowei, Khikel, Maruta.

The eight-sided perimeter of the calendar is marked by a waist-high stone wall. The north-south and east-west lines intersect at the center of the octagon, where a forty-foot pole rises. The calendar is a means for the priest-

ers to mark the seasons, by following the positions of the heavenly bodies.

As they cross the plain to the great mound, excitement stirs in Shua. She leads the way to the Hill People camp, which is located in a sunny spot on the western slope. People welcome them, inquire anxiously where they have been. The rites begin in three days.

Shua eats, rests, visits the other camps in search of old friends. Over and over she hears the same words: "Shemo? Gone these five years," or "Astes? She passed on to the land where the harvest never ends."

The next morning Jev appears with breakfast: flatbread, bean cake, and fish. "Grandmother, Eshu and I would like you to represent us at the ceremony, along with his father," she says.

"Don't you want to ask Hedi?" Shua hears a note of disapproval in her own voice.

"We spoke to her, and she agrees with our decision."

Shua feels awkward, remembering her disgust with them on the trail—disgust that has not gone away. "Perhaps someone else . . ." she begins.

Jev looks disappointed but is too polite to press further. They eat together in silence.

"If you're certain," Shua says at last.

Jev brightens. "Yes! Certain."

On the morning of the ceremony, Shua rises early, dresses in the beautiful abaji-skin clothes, laces her boots with care. There is a battle raging in her breast; she wants to bless Jev's union but cannot. Which of them is the traitor, Shua wonders—Jev for loving a Dolowei, who were once the enemy, or herself for hating the Dolowei, who are now allies? The camp has barely begun to stir when Shua walks to the river to make her supplications to the Mother.

"Mother," she says, "am I betraying you if I represent them? Is that why their wedding gift is to be a stone?" She has not forgotten the package the sorceress gave her.

The Mother, of course, does not answer. For the barest moment Shua thinks she hears Rous's voice again, as she did that day on the trail, but she is mistaken. She returns to her tent; in a little while Jev and Eshu come to get her. Together they make the long climb up the ladder.

The ceremony continues into the afternoon. The two couples—the other couple represents the Khikel and Maruta peoples—make food offerings on the altars of the chief gods. Priests chant, the great mythologies are recited. Representing the Hill People, Shua tells how the people were carried to earth in the fiery bird stitched in beads across her shoulders. With the other representatives, she anoints the heads of the couples, who retire to their tents to consummate their unions. She is secretly amused, for she knows the union of Jev and Eshu was consummated days ago on the trail.

The singing and dancing will go on far into the night. Shua does not join in. When it begins to grow dark and the torches are lit, she climbs down the ladder—very carefully, for her balance is suddenly not good and she makes the distressing discovery that she cannot grip with her right hand. Somehow she finds her tent, adds



wood to the banked fire, claws through her things with her left hand to find the package, sewn shut and sealed with wax, which holds the stone.

"Throw it in the river," Rous tells her.

Shua struggles to comply but cannot get up. A short time later, or perhaps it is a long time, for she is muddled and does not know for sure, Jev and Eshu enter.

Eshu takes her in his arms. "Are you ill, Grandmother?" he says, sounding distressed. He turns to Jev. "I think we should find a priest."

"Yes. I'll go. I'll hurry."

Shua turns her head toward Eshu. "One day on the trail," she says, her tongue swollen and half dead in her mouth, "you reminded me of my mother."

He looks puzzled, as if he hasn't heard her words correctly. "Mother?"

"Yes. I had a son once, but it was long ago, and I don't know what became of him. I left him in the sacred grove."

"I'm sorry," he says, leaning closer to hear, "but I can't understand your words."

Shua struggles to say what she should have said during the ceremony, which is, "I give you my blessing." But the only word that comes out is "Give."

He seems to think she means the package lying next to her. He places it in her hand.

Jev returns. "I've sent someone for a priest," she says. "Grandmother Shua, how do you feel?"

*Fine*, Shua tries to tell her. *I will be fine in a moment.*

"She wanted that package," Eshu says.

Jev removes the package from Shua's fingers. The warrior struggles not to let it go, but Jev breaks the seal and unwraps it. Inside is not a stone but the necklaces with the jade pendants, no longer conjoined. Jev studies them in the firelight.

"Look, Eshu, they're you and I," she says.

Jev hands Eshu the pendant with Rous's profile, Rous on her wedding day. But Eshu says, "It's you, Jev," and indeed, in the firelight Jev is the image of her grandmother.

Jev studies the one with Shua's profile, the broad forehead and blunt chin.

"It looks exactly like you, Eshu," Jev tells him. "Who made such fine likenesses of us without our knowing?"

But Shua has lost interest in the pendants. She no longer feels her arms and legs, or the gentle hands of the young people, or the crackling warmth of the fire. For the third time she hears Rous speak, and turns her head toward the beloved voice.

"Come home," Rous says.

Shua says, "Yes." It is the sound of her soul departing. ♦



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# Faces in the Sky



**Michael Kallenberger**

The walls were some kind of smooth pressed board, but the “floor” of the cell was the same dense jumble of undulating bony stalks that passed for a planetary surface everywhere in the Kort city. After three days here (the Kort had let him keep his watch) his eyes had adapted some to the darkness, but not much; he’d learned of the floor’s structure more by feel than by vision. He could drop a coin into a small gap between two intertwined branches and listen to it rattle on its way down through the layers, although he never heard one actually strike the distant surface—the true surface, the soil.

Exactly nine hours and forty-three minutes after his last meal, he heard the soft scraping sounds of a Kort’s thumbed feet locking onto the floor-stalks just outside his cell. From what he knew, the species had no particular obsession with clocks. He suspected their timeliness in the case of their prisoner was simply a matter of courtesy. They *were* very courteous—when he’d insisted that human beings simply could not stand all the time, and they certainly couldn’t sit or lie comfortably on that floor, the Kort had

Illustration by Steve Fritchew

greeted this alarming declaration with suspicion, but ultimately they'd provided him with a thick mat to sit and sleep on.

The door opened. A flat, lifeless breeze smelling of melted plastic spanked his face. The corridor was nearly as dim as his windowless cell. The long and elegant outline of a Kortl—the prisoner no longer thought of them as insectoid, a comparison which had at best been superficial and now seemed downright silly—eyed the human silently and handed him a small crosspiece with a bulging sack dangling from either end, like a primitive pan balance.

The human accepted it with a sharp sniff. The door closed. He hung the contraption from the hook in the corner. The chain had been extended by a loop of fabric, to accommodate the shorter species. His practiced fingers reached into one of the pouches, curled the tubule over the lip, and began sucking out the honeylike nourishment. The other, he knew, contained a pulpy fluid that had tasted like mildewy gravy the first time he'd tried it, but now actually seemed palatable.

He felt a welcome satisfaction pulsing through his body as he drank. When the flow stopped, he pinched the leathery spigot closed and wrapped it back into the pouch.

Most everything about his imprisonment had already become familiar. He wiped his mouth and muttered, "That should be scaring the crap out of you, Kiel." Then he reached into the second pouch, drew the tubule between his lips, and began sucking greedily.

*Don't think about it, don't even moisten your lips, just press the signal.*

—Done. Now he could let himself wonder why he'd come; he would never let Booltheizz know he'd gotten this far only to back down.

After a brainscan and an exploded-view hologram of his body had been transmitted upstairs, the elevator arrived to carry him to the entrance of the Kortl's suite, eighty-seven floors above Floating Manhattan's causeway network. Kiel Parsevere knocked, his head held high. As he intended it to be when he left.

The door was opened by a domestic robot, the kind that was little more than a hat rack on treads. It turned and led the visitor into the luxury condo's intersecting shadows, through the master suite and onto the balcony. There, reminding Parsevere of a grasshopper perched atop a twig, was Booltheizz, relaxing with his four limbs astride a set of playground climbing bars.

The Kortl did not at first acknowledge the new presence. The high porch looked across a canyon of dusk at the Island Manhattan skyline, blackened and jagged. Sheet lightning rinsed through the swollen clouds like glowing dye. Just then thunder pounded in the distance, though no rain fell.

Parsevere suspected that Booltheizz was elderly by Kortl standards. He had almost no lower neck, his muzzle seemingly propped directly atop his narrow, commensal yellow chest. The neck stalk rising from his extended spine to his upper head was long and heavily striated, presumably with age.

The exile to Earth blinked once, mechanically, the Kortl equivalent of a sigh. Without taking his gaze from the gray-on-black cloud layers, he said, "Why did you come, Kiel-parsevere?"

While Booltheizz spoke, the former colonel observed him patiently—Kortl were functionally deaf when speaking. Membranes within supple flaps on either side of the tiny, brainless upper head served as both eardrums and vocal cords; the muzzle was strictly for ingesting food.

When he was certain his host had finished, Parsevere said, "By now I'm sure you know . . . the research projects team is going to Kort." After the barest pause he added, "I wanted to make sure you understood that this has nothing to do with the . . . ah, with the proposition you suggested to me. A Kort expedition has been under consideration for years. With all the new interest in atmospheric biochemistry, the board finally decided it was time to go."

"And did you, Kielparsevere, vote with the majority?"

"I voted for a Kort mission last year, and the year before, and the year before that. Long before you ever . . . met me."

The alien voice remained still. His head didn't turn. Then, in his most liquid warble, he said, "How is your son's health, Kielparsevere?"

*Fuck you, you slimy bastard.* "You know the answer to that."

"Haven't your xenobehaviorists told you that Kortl aren't capable of anything other than straightforward behavior?"

"You're an adaptable species, I'm sure."

"You wouldn't have come here if you hadn't reconsidered my proposition."

"I don't take bribes. If I influenced how other people voted it was because I believed in my arguments. Learning more about the Kort atmosphere was just something that made sense." Parsevere reached for a cigarette, then hesitated, wondering if it would convey his nervousness to the Kortl. Too late now—he pressed one between his lips and lit it, shielding the flame from the lush pre-storm breezes until a cherry glow germinated at the tip.

"And so you've come for what?"

"There's still the part about the canister. Now that the Kort mission will happen legitimately . . . I'll agree to drop it into the atmosphere. In exchange for, ah, what you proposed. There wouldn't be any ethical conflict there. A simple business deal."

"Certainly."

Parsevere drew on the cigarette. His shoulders relaxed a little—he hadn't realized how knotted up they'd been.

But later, as he stepped out among the blaring nighttime traffic, he realized he'd failed to leave his uneasiness behind. There was much in the arrangement with Booltheizz that could be construed as evidence of wrongdoing. Kiel Parsevere's record, as a soldier and now as an administrator, was the kind that would place a fictional hero above suspicion; but this was real life, and there were predators on the foundation's board, rivals who stalked his every misstep. He could confide in no one.

Under a lightning-streaked sky he crossed the shim-

mering causeway into Island Manhattan. He was cheating his fellow humans out of a portion of his trust, and placing it instead in the inscrutable, an exiled alien autocrat who'd once faced execution by his own species—having only been granted this plush "retirement" so that civil war could be avoided.

And the sky flouted any notion of timing by refusing still to rain.

Occasionally, his thoughts distant, his mutterings aimless, he would shuffle about the cell and kick softly at the nubs of broken floor-stalks. The floor itself declined very slightly as he stepped away from the door, by design, he realized. A low, flat hood ran along the high end, built into the single squat step leading down from the entrance-way. At the turn of a valve, a sheet of water gushed forth from this—he eventually realized this was intended to pulverize waste matter and flush it through the gaps in the floor.

The Kortl were not a hostile species. Simply isolationist. Their leaders were probably deciding right now how to best usher the human trespassers off their planet.

Parsevere sat on the edge of his mat and wrestled with the end of a broken stalk. Right, left, right, like a joystick—a jammed one. It had almost no give. He stared at it, and tried to visualize where this branch might lead. Tunneling and twisting its way through the network, how far might it go? To another city, or another continent—or to Inez's cell?

Inez. He tapped on the stalk, fancying that it would channel Morse code messages to his pilot. The mere thought of her name triggered a guilty ache in his conscience. Had dropping the canister somehow led to their capture?

Parsevere held his breath, and listened. Whispering in the distance, flirting with the limits of his hearing: the wall of wind. His legs crossed, his eyes narrowed, he angled his gaze upward. He often thought he could sense subtle shifts in the cell's sparse thatchy light. Was that caused by the Kort wind too, refiltering what little illumination got through the denser upper atmosphere?

Maybe Teodora Zvec was right. Maybe there was something mystical about it.

Inez, at least, was most certainly in a cell much like his own. Of Teddy's current whereabouts Parsevere had no idea. There was no place on Kort for a human to run or hide. But . . . well, it was starting to seem that Teddy had wanted just that, to be hunted down by the Kortl—but on different terms from him and Inez.

He closed his eyes and listened again for the wind.

Serenaded by the rhythmic *sboosbing* of the lawn sprinklers, Parsevere scratched behind his ear as he mounted the steps of the Aerospace Administration building. It felt odd to be entering the lobby without wearing a uniform, or even a tie. He nodded to the new receptionist as he passed through the inner glass doors.

Kiel Parsevere had been the consensus choice as the Kort project administrator and *de facto* ship's commander. He'd recruited a two-person crew; the first had been Inez

Monziega, whose piloting skills had saved his life once as a colonel and once as a civilian.

His other recruit was Dr. Teodora Zvec, the well-known atmosphere biochemist, a taciturn Pole who emerged from her shell every few years to shock the world with some glimpse of her personal philosophy. Most people liked to think her disagree-at-all-costs attitude was the result of the standard Traumatic Childhood Experience, but Parsevere didn't buy it. There was never any anger in her manner, never any sense of superiority. Some individuals just seemed to emerge from the womb with an alien perspective, and Teddy was one of them.

Some of the pundits had suggested that Zvec didn't really believe the outrageous things she said, that she was merely telling one extended joke at humankind's expense. Parsevere had noted little capacity for amusement in Teddy—but then, those who told jokes weren't always amused by them.

And yet he and Teddy got along quite well, if only because he enjoyed the way she always jolted him out of his complacency, and didn't seem to mind when he inevitably returned to it. As for the Kort project, her role would be to control logistical decisions related to scooping up a sample of the atmosphere.

Now, in search of Monziega, Parsevere had been directed to Cartography. He poked his head into one of the dimly lit chart rooms and found himself in a holoprojected stellar system: Kort and its primary, Asic.

From her perch on the front edge of the console, Monziega said, "You've got a comet in your ear." She was munching an apple.

Half self-consciously, he scratched at it, keeping his arm up to bat at a blue-green gas giant swelling in his field of view. Reasserting his common sense, he walked right through Asic and dropped himself into the chair, letting it swivel just a bit with his momentum. Past the silhouetted Monziega hovered Kort.

Or rather, a cottony tuft within which the planet hid. The atmosphere was an incredible soup of complex organics and free radicals, a network of biochemical nexuses that in some ways mimicked a primitive nervous system. Deep within this ocean of electrical impulses raged epoch-spanning hurricanes which trapped vast pockets of lighter gases near the surface. Amazingly, within one such pocket, intelligent, oxygen-breathing life—the Kortl—had evolved.

And a symbiosis had emerged. In their adolescence as a species, the Kortl had studied the organic soup, and they had come to think of it as a vast open mind, a brain without thoughts. They learned how to "communicate" with this *polynexus* electrochemically, storing information in its pockets of free radicals by linking them into quasi-stable chains. It became for the Kortl a sort of biochemical computer, and much more: the incubator of a culture.

The brain was now rich with "ideas"; the Kortl regarded the polynexus as an entity, and though in strict terms it possessed no self-awareness, perhaps it could be argued that something had been created which borrowed a little of the individuality of each and every Kortl—a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

"There are two ways we could go about this," Monziega said, eyeing the construct.

Parsevere had come back around to prop the small of his back against the console, next to her. She had dark, chin-length hair and coppery skin that gave her cheekbones a blackened look in the weak light. He said, "By the lack of a crease in your forehead, I'd say you've got a preference."

*Crunch* into the apple. With a light pen she formed glowing traces in the map. "We go into an orbit centered on Asic, at Kort's leading Trojan point, and drop the scavenger missile behind us. We wait for Kort to catch up to it, it skims off a chunk of atmosphere, and then it falls in toward the sun. We spiral in to meet it and leave the system."

"Or?"

"We simply orbit Kort itself and slingshot the scavenger missile between the planet, grab it again on the other side."

"In and out in a couple of days," Parsevere mused. "I like it."

"We'd be a lot easier to spot, and a lot more vulnerable if we were."

"Depends. The other way we'd be in the system for . . . what, weeks? How fast does the daily risk accumulate out there?"

"I don't like being an easy target. We're taking a chunk of their data-storage capacity—a tiny chunk, sure, but they're bound to notice." *Crunch*.

He shook his head. "The scavenger's equipped with a seeding head that's designed to catalyze a reaction in the polynexus. Teddy says that whatever we snip out, the two loose ends—I think she means 'loose ends' metaphorically—anyway, they'll link together, and any lost data will be interpolated."

"Interpolated data wouldn't necessarily make sense. Alarms might go off—metaphorically, of course."

The sarcastic edge in her voice gave him a mild start. He went on: "According to Teddy, nothing will really be lost. I . . . ah, maybe we should get her in here to explain this. . . ." He craned his neck toward the door, as if he could call to Teddy's office from three flights below.

"Let her be. She's reading her journals."

Parsevere swallowed. "Journals?"

"Don't most religions tell you to commune with their gods before taking the sacraments?" In response to Parsevere's continuing puzzled grimace, she went on: "Atmospheric biochem. Kort is the promised land for people like her. And not one of them—a no-human scientist—has ever been near the place. It's her big chance."

Monziega's attitude—her . . . hostility?—was uncharacteristic of her. Parsevere brushed it aside by gesturing toward the map. "The polynexus stores data hologically—like a hologram image. Individual records don't add incremental information, they add incremental *clarity*. The chances are minuscule that what we take will *ever* be missed, much less while we're still in the system."

She hurled her apple core at the waste chute with a sharp snap of the wrist, missing badly; Parsevere watched her ignoring the splatter. "It all sounds too convenient."

He stepped forward suddenly, into the projection, and poked his finger in the vicinity of Kort. Features softly underlit, he said, "We'll go with the tight orbit. I trust Teddy's calculations." The flat tone of his voice was trying to order Monziega to trust them, too.

A petulant look brushed her features. "Kiel . . . I'll support any decision you make, you know that. But for what it's worth, I think you made the wrong one."

He hesitated just a moment before leaving the room. A man in his position, he told himself, shouldn't want to know what she thought.

Something soft and black and seductive receded and dream-sleep remained. He was in a coffin, an old wooden coffin from the time of Poe, and something was thumping above. He'd been buried alive, but he felt no sense of panic, only urgency. *Out, I have to get out. . . .*

It was damp and gritty inside. His fingers played over the underside of the lid, and with each *thump!* it bulged in like a drumhead. Someone was working it with a pickaxe, exhuming him. . . .

Suddenly he realized he wasn't quite alone. He looked to his right in the low, incongruously lit space—a grinning, rotted corpse stared back at him.

With each *thump!* the body seemed to edge a little closer to his shoulder, and the need to get out was like a peach pit lodged painfully in his throat. *Thump!* and the corpse's sleeve brushed his own. *Thump!*—and was that hot breath he felt on his cheek?

*Get me out! Get me out!*

The lid shattered. He saw nothing more. And then *he* was the man astride the grave, wielding the pickaxe, looking down at a single, solitary figure in the coffin. And it was the perfectly preserved, perfectly tranquil form of his son, Jim Parsevere.

Silence. Clean awareness: bowed floor stalks, digging into his back right through the sleeping mat; alien smells; dark air settling over his sweaty skin. He was awake.

His body's aches made him aware of each of his muscles separately. He tried to sit, but a blunted stalk was pressing up into his thigh, so he stood and urinated onto the floor under the hood, the high-pitched hiss cutting apart the darkness, and washed it away with a spurt of water.

*Would the black market icers have been any worse than this?* Maybe not. Maybe a quick, clean surrender of his honor would've been better than this protracted battle with the ambiguities of his conscience.

The hardest part about leaving Sol System had been losing daily contact with Jim's doctors, even though the twenty-two-year-old had been placed in metabolic protraction the week before. Talking to the doctor, Parsevere had forced himself to be as straightforward as a computerized questionnaire:

"What's his level of awareness?"

"For all practical purposes, he's in a vegetative state. He . . ."

"And the rate of aging?"

"Standard for metabolic protraction—about a day for every ten years of calendar time."

"And when do the computer models suggest a cure will be found?"

"The models are meaningless. My guess . . . more than decades."

"How much more?" But he'd turned away before the doctor could answer, rubbing his palm over the bitter line of his mouth. He was watching his relationship with his son turn out like a bad melodrama: the father that Jim Parsevere had just been getting to know—after divorce had sent him a continent away, after a five-year tour of duty out-system, after still more years apart because of the old man's stubbornness—that father would be dead for a hundred years or more by the time Jim awakened.

Parsevere tried to get comfortable atop the ten centimeters of the mat. Maybe fold it in half, sacrifice his legs for more cushioning under his back. . . . It was too stiff to fold. He lay on his back and stared at the hypothetical ceiling.

He'd investigated thoroughly; the ban on putting healthy people under metabolic protraction was absolute. He could not join Jim that way. Parsevere found himself cursing peace, and the World Common Legislature it had spawned—in the old days there were dozens of small countries where anything that could command a dollar was legal.

Of course, even now there were the black market icers. But for a man like himself, they were out of the question. And then there was Booltheizz's ship, in a parking orbit beyond the High Equator—officially a Kort enclave as long as the Terrans still recognized Booltheizz as the legal ruler of Kort. Using the automated metabolic protraction equipment there would be well within the letter of the law. But, given the bargain Booltheizz was offering—the way it made Parsevere question his own motives—it wasn't without tradeoffs.

"A tradeoff isn't the same as a sellout," Parsevere declared. He wished for a cigarette.

Even at this distance the atmosphere of Kort looked like tufted gray-orange cotton: the polynexus. While Inez busied herself with minor course adjustments, Parsevere paid little attention, wondering instead about the canister he'd secretly affixed to the probe and whether it had disengaged in time. He tried to distract himself by imagining the fluid mass below as a world-enveloping biological computer. There was a sense of the profound to it, and noting that made him think of Teddy.

He climbed down the ladder and crow-stepped around the tight arc of the stairwell into Teddy's compartment. Reclining in her hammock, she was languidly glancing over a telescreen propped against her upright thighs while she worked at her teeth with a bit of dental floss.

Parsevere arched his eyebrows. He didn't know what he'd expected. A look of fascination at least. Maybe even rapture, as she contemplated the sight of Kort; Inez's mildly acidic comments had hit their mark, he supposed.

"Hello, Kiel." As Parsevere stepped into the cabin she laid the flat rectangle aside. Kort was nowhere to be seen—the telescreen was in fact displaying a Polish translation

of some trashy best-selling novel. So much for Teddy's quasireligious inclinations.

"There's a great view out front. . . ." he proffered.

"For all our observing it, the planet won't come to us." Pushing a smile onto his lips: "Then you're not all that interested. . . .?"

"I didn't say that. There's nothing I wouldn't have done to obtain the coming moment. Nothing."

Parsevere eyed her. Beyond the glib fanaticism, it was an odd choice of words, though Teddy's English wasn't always perfect. "One particular moment? What moment is that?"

"The moment." Almost wistfully, she added, "One with the all. . . ." Parsevere was still puzzling over that when Teddy pushed out of the hammock. She swallowed. "Come on, Kiel. I have a feeling you'd be more comfortable if you could share the view with me." She passed into the stairwell and started up the steps.

He opened his mouth to protest—this concern about someone else's comfort was a first—then just shrugged. It was her way of turning him back from something she simply didn't want to share, something she wanted to remain alien. But as he was leaving the compartment he glimpsed something disturbing in the shadows of Teddy's open duffel: a prescription bottle. If she was on medication, she should've informed him of it before launch.

It was probably trivial, but he was irritated enough to pull the bottle out of the bag. He scowled. The label indicated it was an inhibitive agent, sometimes used during cellular surgery. Teddy probably used it in her research. Gingerly he returned it to the bag—the stuff was so concentrated, a couple drops could shut down the body's self-repair mechanisms, ensuring that even a small cut would be fatal.

Parsevere entered the control cabin just as Inez was saying, "The probe should be coming up right there." Teddy, leaning back in the copilot's chair, looked only mildly interested. A red arrow appeared within the paraplasic of the window, which the computer keyed to Parsevere's line of sight. After a minute or so Inez called out, "There it is!" A glint of sunlight had appeared right at the tip of the arrow.

The faintest rumble indicated that the bay was opening. The light reflecting off the probe's surface melted away for a moment, but Parsevere was already feeling a sense of relief.

"Something's wrong!" Monziera snapped. Her fingers played over the controls with hurried though economical movements. "Our orbit is decaying, and fast. Something is—damn, it's overriding the computer!"

Parsevere gestured for Teddy to get out of the chair and strapped himself in, calling up a copy of Inez's readouts. His own hands moved over the keyboard less gracefully as he began troubleshooting the programmed orbit.

"Inez. . . ." Parsevere glanced for an instant to the paraplasic; the disc of the planet was filling two-thirds of the view. "Teddy! Get strapped in!"

"I think. . . ." Inez rarely sounded hesitant. "I think we've got a renegade, Kiel. . . ." Still her fingers darted over the keys.



"In the computer? Can we detour our own programs around it?"

"I'm working on it, I'm working on it!" Both hands busy, her face had become all lines and planes.

"How the hell could it get in?"

"Aaahh . . ." The ship had made a gut-churning downward lurch, prompting her shrill yelp. He forced himself to release white-knuckle grips on both armrests.

"We're going in," Teddy whispered from behind.

"Not yet," Inez responded. "We're not as close as we look—it's a big planet." In fact, the last starlit crescent of black space had just been pushed out of the field of view.

"There are external jack-ins," Inez said as they both worked. "For repair drones and the like. Supposed to be read-only, but—I don't know any other way. Except from the *inside*." Her tone was unmistakably accusatory.

"The Kortl would not do this. . . ." Teddy's voice came softly from behind, blending awe—finally!—and indignation.

"Sit down!" the pilot barked.

"I am sitting!"

"Then shut up!" Then, perhaps in recognition of the inevitable, Monziega became notably calmer: "Hold tight—*now* we're going in."

And they plummeted into the atmosphere, the polynexus; its substance rushed up and past them like a demon-spewing hole into some underworld. The ship vibrated and moaned. Parsevere felt his throat constrict. They had become an incongruous bit of noise in the great planetwide datanet, plunging toward a bullet-splatter meeting with the surface.

Fresh air, stormclouded daylight . . . and pain. His head throbbed and his foot was twisted back by a mangled metal crosspiece. Something soft but bulky was wedged under the small of his back. When he tried to squirm it free by arching his spine, his foot felt as though he had thrust it into a shredder. He remained motionless, and silent, for several minutes.

When he remembered that the ship was steeped in the alien atmosphere of Kort, he raised his hand in front of his face, reassuring himself with the silver-blue edge of his aurasuit, activated during their descent. Foolishly he tested his lungs with a long drink of the oxygen-nitrogen mix circulating through the paradermal environment.

There was a rising sound of commotion in the distance, and the sudden spang of assaulted metal. The Kortl were forcing their way into the ship. Parsevere finally managed to rise to a seated position.

If he hadn't been scared witless, he might have stopped to admire the designer of the renegade program, which all told really had brought the ship down in comparative safety. Yet despite his fear, he was too drained, too much in pain to feel any urge to defend himself or his crewmates, whose silvery silhouettes he could now see sprawled on the floor of the forecabin. They were breathing peacefully; it was almost a relief, after weeks of watching the nearly constant tension between them. He braced himself to get up and check on them.

The hatch burst in, loudly and sharply, the cutter's

noise instantly dopplering up from a distant steak-sizzle to the sound of a searing downpour. The tool-wielding Kortl, crouched just beyond the ragged gap, killed the power, while another strode right over her comrade. Two others with obscure-looking weapons followed, looking almost comical in their spacesuits—the polynexal atmosphere was as poisonous to Kortl as to humans. Their leader, similarly draped in a clinging cellophanelike sheet a single molecule thick, began rumbling in their native tongue, which Parsevere could understand only when spoken syllable by syllable.

The humans were gathered up like prisoners. He didn't know why he hadn't expected that, given the circumstances of their arrival. He sucked his tongue as he tested his injury; liquid pain congealed in his foot. Teddy's voice: "Kiel, are you all right?" He nodded. The women professed to nothing more than bruises.

With her upper head, the Kortl leader gestured toward the hatch. Parsevere turned up the rigidity of his aurasuit's left leg until he could walk on it without putting pressure on his damaged foot. They stepped outside, where a fifth Kortl was standing sentry. The female indicated that the three off-worlders should clasp their hands behind their heads and march forward.

Wordlessly, they descended a gentle slope. Immersion in the polynexus was like walking in a thick, kinetic fog, making it difficult to get a real feel for the lay of the land or the vaster topography. An occasional contrail of firefly-twinkles jetted across the gray edges of Parsevere's vision—presumably some kind of electrical transfer between banks of free radicals.

And then he heard it. A distant . . . chanting. Vibrating. Rushing. They were approaching the outer wall of a continent-spanning hurricane older than the Kortl themselves.

As they walked, Parsevere kept swinging his gaze from the treacherous terrain to the distance, hoping for a glimpse of the wind wall. But there was nothing but gray, so unbroken it was a little claustrophobic. The human commander glanced to Monziega and Zvec—but the almost translucent aurasuits frosted their features, giving them an inscrutable look.

The Kortl leader gave a shrill bark. The humans stopped, but reacted no further, so one of the arms-bearers gestured toward the ground with his weapon. Parsevere, puzzled, licked his lips, wondering if he could frame a question. Then he saw a place where the surface folded back underneath itself, sheltering a dark opening. Their journey was to move underground.

One of the Kortl passed through first, squatting knees-over-shoulder and inserting himself into the narrow gap, the excess material of his suit crinkling loudly. Parsevere followed him to the entrance. He placed his hand on the outcropping and hesitated, looking up one last time. For some reason it was now clear to him: the distant monolithic gray *was* the wall of the hurricane, stationary enough to appear on maps. The crease in the terrain led to a tunnel passing underneath the wind-barrier separating the polynexus from the pocket ecology.

Just inside the entrance there was a small stone platform with room enough to stand upright, and a crude

ramp. Electric lamps provided a dawnlike illumination. The lead Kortl, and Parsevere, and then Monziega descended. When no one followed Inez, the two humans hesitated, looked back. From the surface came a rapid-fire exchange in the rubbery Kortl language, and then two legs—two Kortl legs—appeared in the opening above. The new arrival leaped halfway down the ramp, coming out of his crouch and pressing on Inez's back in one hurried gesture. His puckered airtuit glimmering, he snapped an order.

Neither human moved. In Kortl, Parsevere asked what was going on. The order was repeated. "Where's Teddy?" Parsevere blurted in English, and before he could gather himself to translate his question the *crackackack* of weapons fire melted the words in his throat.

Much of his time was now spent expertly balanced on the edge of sleep, sitting hunched over his crossed legs, his mind drifting until it snagged on a dream. He was snapped back to alertness from one such session by the groaning of his own stomach.

Parsevere looked at his watch. It had been more than eleven hours since his last meal.

He started to stand, paused at a crouch to test his foot; the Kortl had repaired it expertly. But every floor-stalk that had ever pressed into his back was rippling through his muscles once more. As he stood, he stretched, thinking that a change in the rigid routine must be part of a larger charge. After . . . eight Kortl days. Eight days, a good, round figure—if you reckoned it in base two, which the Kortl did, it was 1000 days, a very likely figure for a prison sentence. A certain eagerness caught hold of him.

A brittle clicking; the lock was being opened. A Kortl stood in the doorway, with no food sacks. Without entering, he turned and gestured for Parsevere to follow. Foolishly, the human hesitated—because he smelled bad, and because he had eight days of growth on his face. But he caught up with three quick strides and trailed the Kortl down the dim corridor.

With no word of explanation, without being brought before any Kortl of rank, Parsevere was led outside. The murky sepia of the Kortl "day" inside the pocket ecology was almost blinding to him. The oxygen-nitrogen breeze was the most refreshing thing he'd ever felt. When at last he could force his eyes open, he saw that they were standing at one end of an open expanse in the densest part of the Kortl city.

The plaza was actually the floor of a huge bowl made entirely of the intertwined stalks. Around the edges the growths curved upward, merging and rebranching into huge basketlike trees, each cupping dense networks of walled platform-suites which clustered into structures the size of small skyscrapers in Island Manhattan.

The floor of the vast bowl was thronged with Kortl, moving here, moving there, conducting transactions, carrying out a choreography of politics, of economics, of religion, of Kortl drives unknown.

Far overhead, the vast dome of the hurricane hummed.

Dazed, Parsevere and his escort continued forward. He was being led, he saw, up a ramp to a huge balcony

jutting from the next level of one of the trees-cum-buildings, a small plaza in its own right; many of the structures had them. This one was set up something like a small open-air theater, where he was awaited by ten or twelve Kortl . . . and Inez Monziega.

They were arranged in two arcs of Kortl furniture, the same jungle-gym bars he'd seen in Booltheizz's apartment. Monziega was seated cross-legged on a mat in the aisle between the two arcs. She eyed him wordlessly as he sat next to her. At first he didn't even look at her, afraid to react in the midst of the Kortl. Then he whispered: "Inez . . ." almost involuntarily, and time jumped forward a handful of seconds. They were wrapped in each other's arms, and the damned Kortl were a thousand kilometers away. And then came the sound of crying and he realized it was his own face that was wet with tears.

Self-consciously, they disentangled themselves. They sat still and composed as all the Kortl upper heads turned to watch still more arrivals. Four newcomers were transporting a gurneylike cart on which reclined the form of Teodora Zvec, naked and unmoving.

This time Parsevere's protective numbness remained intact as Teddy was brought to the center stage area.

"Christ . . ." he heard Inez mutter.

As the gurney was turned, a comet-shaped wound became visible in Teddy's side.

"The ceremony . . . !" Parsevere whispered. "For the dead. . . . It's the highest honor, reserved for the Kortl's most talented, and . . . for enemies killed by a Kortl."

As if the gurney were a holostage, Parsevere and Monziega watched dispassionately while two Kortl opened up beakers of various elixirs and washed down the long-legged form, her bearing aquiline even in death. Last, a tub of reeking yellow-white crystals was opened. Both Kortl scooped up a half-liter or so and began sprinkling the stuff over the corpse. When it was thoroughly dusted they returned the scoops to the bin.

Parsevere's trance was broken by dense shuffling sounds. When he looked up, the onlooking Kortl were all in the process of dismounting their bars and leaving the staging area, their concept of a ceremony apparently complete.

Finally a cord of emotion went taut within him. He grabbed a passing shoulder and asked in careful Kortl, "What will happen now?"

The tiny upper head looked down at him. "You will be sent back to your planet. It will be explained."

"Not what will happen to *me*. What happens to . . . the honored one?"

The Kortl paused. "She goes to join."

"To join what?"

"To join."

"Your word confuses me."

"She will be one with the all." *One with the all*. Teddy had used that phrase, back when they'd been approaching Kortl . . .

"Kiel!"

At Inez's cry he whirled. She was standing, hugging herself, watching thin streamers of vapor wafting upward from Teddy's body. On the corpse's torso the skin was

pocking, tearing, and curling back at the edges, revealing the musculature underneath. Her substance was subliming, turning directly into gas.

Parsevere craned his neck and, as if at his cue, so did Monziga. The smoke climbed, past the tips of the tree-like vertical branchings, where it seemed to accelerate, acquiring a spiral momentum, turning faster and faster until it corkscrewed itself into the wall of wind, the borderlands of the polynexus, high overhead.

Parsevere's gaze followed the trail back down. Teddy's body was almost one-third gone, hollowed out and thick with fumes. He looked back up, where it was easier to think about what was happening. "One with the all . . . my God, Inez, do you see what's happening, the polynexus, the group mind, I never believed . . ."

At a sniff from Inez, he tented his fingertips gently against her shoulder blade, though he kept his gaze on the sky.

"The stinking bitch," she muttered.

Empty of all but a few furnishings, Booltheizz's condo seemed a lonely place. Kiel Parsevere's gaze swept over the huge foyer and the double S-sweep of contoured steps, watching the treaded hat rack scurrying among the shadows. Then he remembered that these outer rooms never had been furnished; it was the robot, still chasing the commands of its deceased master, that had given Parsevere a sad and empty feeling.

Or was he wrong? Would he find Booltheizz in the master suite, alive and still staring out over the city? No—on his return voyage from Kort, Parsevere had convinced himself that the canister he'd surreptitiously attached to their polynexus probe had indeed contained the sublimated remains of the Kortl exile.

Booltheizz was now one with the all. Banned by his fellows in life, in death he'd stolen his way back in.

The polynexus was rich with a kind of data; that had been established. And Parsevere could accept that the biochemical transcribers used in the Kortl ceremony had reconfigured the information stored in Teddy's cells—the cellular memory as well as the genetic code—and melded it with that of billions of dead Kortl. But was the sea of information aware, conscious, even alive? Maybe. Maybe not. But maybe it didn't matter. Maybe to the Kortl—and to Teddy—there were bonds stronger than mutual awareness.

Parsevere went to Booltheizz's closet, found three large storage boxes. He went through them, examined the contents, skimmed through several thick sheafs. True to his word, Booltheizz had left him all he needed to board the Kortl's docked ship and make use of the automated metabolic protraction equipment there.

The former colonel went out onto the balcony, lighting a cigarette as he leaned on the railing. It was a crystal clear evening, the stars shining boldly even through the diluting Manhattan glow.

The human spirit could not accept finality. For those, like Parsevere, who didn't believe in God, there had to be something else, some at least metaphorical eternal life. He'd always believed that immortality lay in the record you left behind. And what kind of record had Teodora Zvec, for example, left behind? Damnation—by nothing more than the appearance of wrongdoing. Monziga, and now others, were convinced Teddy had planned all that had happened: arguing for the riskier orbit around Kort, sabotaging the ship, and engineering her own death with a foolhardy escape attempt, all so she could be "one with the all."

Teddy's plotting was more than a suspicion to Parsevere. The inhibitive agent from her duffel had undoubtedly caused her to bleed to death when she'd been shot, ensuring her honored status as an enemy killed in battle. He'd never told anyone about it—it would seem as though he were joining in condemning Teddy, which he could never do.

Parsevere returned to the suite, packed up the contents of Booltheizz's boxes and left them the way he'd found them. There was nothing he'd be taking along. The pathetic robot paced back and forth, frustrated in its efforts to help.

And what about Jim? Jim had already learned how to grow up without a father. He'd become such a good, decent person that when the old man had shown up on his doorstep last year with the notion that he finally wanted to play father after all, Jim had been courteous enough to let Kiel barge into his life and purge a load of guilt in the process. Jim didn't need any more of that.

But it wouldn't necessarily end this way. Parsevere left the condo, and as he waited for the elevator he felt he'd made up his mind. Some day—maybe next month, maybe decades from now—he would return to Kort and do the same thing Teodora Zvec had done. Adding to the group mind, not incremental information, but incremental clarity. He liked the idea of that, liked the implicit priorities.

And when Jim eventually emerged from his centuries of metabolic protraction, he wouldn't have to face the burden of unfreezing the stranger who would be his father. But if he wanted to—if he really wanted to—he, too, could someday reunite himself with Kiel Parsevere in the polynexus.

If not, Jim could simply tell himself that the old man had been crazy, that he was now quite dead.

When the elevator arrived Parsevere locked the car in place—he'd forgotten one thing. He returned to Booltheizz's condo, where the robot still waited, twitching obsequiously. Parsevere shut off its power and placed it in the front closet. Then he headed back toward the elevator, clicking the door shut on a place which, while still lonely, was at least tranquil now. ♦

# Thallasogens II: The Sulfur Dioxide Sea

Stephen L. Gillett

When Isaac Asimov coined the term "thallasogen" (Greek, "sea-former") for chemical compounds that could conceivably make oceans, he then discussed possible candidates. He narrowed the possibilities considerably by looking not just at their chemical properties but also at the abundance of their constituent elements. After all, oceans have to be made out of something reasonably common.

He suggested that water was the most probable thallasogen, and our Earth certainly proves it's possible! He also suggested ammonia as a possible candidate, as I described last month. Like water, ammonia is made of common elements (nitrogen and hydrogen) and it's liquid over a fairly long range of temperature. But all his other candidates—methane, hydrogen, and helium—have too small a liquid range to be probable, even though they're abundant.

But Dr. Asimov overlooked a possible candidate: sulfur dioxide,  $\text{SO}_2$ . He had dismissed sulfur compounds because sulfur's a much rarer element than carbon, oxygen, or nitrogen. But under the right conditions even a fairly rare element like sulfur can be concentrated by the chemical and physical processes working in a planet.

In our Solar System, for example, we have found a world sheathed in sulfur: Jupiter's Moon-sized satellite Io. The sulfur is just a thin surface veneer, of course; virtually all of Io is rock. But a *surface* concentration is just what we need to set up unusual conditions! Io's sulfur got con-

centrated at the surface because all its other volatiles—the other compounds and elements with low boiling points, such as methane, hydrogen, water, nitrogen, and so on—got blown away. Only sulfur, the heaviest of the lot, was left behind.

Now, although some of Io's sulfur is combined into sulfur dioxide, under Io's temperatures the  $\text{SO}_2$  is frozen at the surface. It's liquid only in the subsurface, where it helps drive volcanic "hot spring" type eruptions in much the same manner as water does on Earth. But maybe somewhere Out There a bigger, warmer sulfur-world has liquid  $\text{SO}_2$  at the surface, forming lakes or even oceans. Such a world might be an even larger satellite of a giant planet. Or it might be a planet in its own right, one that started out rich in volatiles but later lost most of them over geologic time.

So let's look at sulfur dioxide in more detail as a thallasogen. In many ways, it's like water (and ammonia). Like those compounds, it has a long liquid range (over  $65^\circ\text{C}$ ) and a high boiling point:  $-10^\circ\text{C}$  under atmospheric pressure, and  $15^\circ\text{C}$  under a pressure of 2.5 atmospheres.

Sulfur dioxide is also a good solvent. Just as with water or liquid ammonia, many chemical reactions can take place in liquid sulfur dioxide. Although  $\text{SO}_2$  doesn't dissolve most salts well, because it's not nearly as polar as water or even ammonia, it's a good solvent for lots of organic compounds. ("Polar" molecules have an uneven distribution of electric

charge.) As a result, liquid sulfur dioxide is used in industry for various chemical syntheses, and for purifying hydrocarbons in oil refining.

As I described last month, the high boiling points and long liquid ranges of both water and ammonia are due to "hydrogen bonding": a fleeting attraction between a hydrogen atom on one molecule and the oxygen or nitrogen atom on another. Sulfur dioxide isn't hydrogen bonded, of course—it doesn't contain hydrogen—but  $\text{SO}_2$  molecules are still attracted to each other fairly strongly, because the sulfur atom on one can make a tenuous bond to an oxygen atom on another. This is what gives it that long liquid range and (relatively) high boiling point. This also is what makes  $\text{SO}_2$  a good solvent: it can glom onto solute molecules even without being highly polar. Even some saltlike compounds are much more soluble in  $\text{SO}_2$  than you might at first expect.

Now for a key (and favorable) difference: sulfur dioxide, unlike water and ammonia, *isn't* vulnerable to photodissociation loss. Photodissociation is the splitting up of molecules by the energy of solar ultraviolet light out at the edge of the atmosphere. Through geologic time it can lead to devastating ocean loss, because if the split-up molecule contains a light atom like hydrogen, *poof!* The hydrogen is lost to space. Over Solar System history Venus probably lost most of her water to space in just this way (see my March 1992 article).

Although ultraviolet light breaks  $\text{SO}_2$  up into sulfur and oxygen atoms easily enough, both those atoms are heavy. So they don't fly off into space like hydrogen does; they instead stick around and eventually recombine.

Sulfur dioxide is unlike water (but like ammonia) in another way, too:  $\text{SO}_2$  ice sinks in liquid  $\text{SO}_2$ . It doesn't float the way water ice does on liquid water. This oddity of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  helps stabilize Earth's climate. But, just as the fact that ammonia ice doesn't float on liquid ammonia may not be the problem that's sometimes thought,  $\text{SO}_2$  ice sinking in  $\text{SO}_2$  oceans may not lead to climatic disaster, either.

Sulfur dioxide has some other chemical quirks. As I mentioned,  $\text{SO}_2$  dissolves different substances than do water or ammonia, because its molecular interactions with its solutes are quite different. So, the organic chemistry needed to build life forms in a sulfur dioxide sea will be very, very different from those in a water sea, or even from those in an ammonia sea. But that, of course, doesn't mean that life's impossible.

Another quirk: there won't be an oxygen atmosphere.  $\text{SO}_2$  reacts with oxygen to give sulfur trioxide,  $\text{SO}_3$ , which is a solid at room temperature. This reaction doesn't happen easily, but it still happens. (It's done industrially here on Earth to make sulfuric acid. It happens very slowly in our atmosphere:  $\text{SO}_2$  released by volcanoes or coal-burning power plants slowly turns into  $\text{SO}_3$ . That then makes acid rain when the  $\text{SO}_3$  reacts with water. However, the reaction needs a catalyst, such as platinum, to happen at a reasonable rate.)

In fact, to keep  $\text{SO}_3$  from forming significantly, the sulfur-dioxide world will need extra sulfur around as an oxygen sink. The  $\text{SO}_2$  sea will lap against shores of pure sulfur—if not everywhere, at least here and there. (Io's  $\text{SO}_2$  is also protected in this way. Any  $\text{SO}_3$  that happens to form reacts with sulfur to make  $\text{SO}_2$  again.)

What *will* the atmosphere be made of, then? As I said above, hydrogen compounds will all be virtually gone, and the little bit remaining—the water, the organic compounds—will be dissolved in the  $\text{SO}_2$  sea. Nitrogen gas is chemically unreactive

and also fairly heavy, so it will no doubt make up some of the atmosphere. And there will also be a smidgen of the noble or “inert” gases neon, argon, krypton, and xenon, which stand aloof from chemical compounds. (Helium is also a member of this group, but it—like hydrogen—will long since have been lost because it's so light.)

But much, and probably most, of the atmosphere will also be sulfur dioxide, evaporated from the sea. This is a big difference from a water world: the compound that makes up the oceans also makes up a large part of the atmosphere! To be sure, water vapor is important in our atmosphere, but it's only a minor constituent. By contrast, on the  $\text{SO}_2$  world the very pressure of the air will be set by the average temperature of the oceans, because that will determine how much  $\text{SO}_2$  can evaporate. (At any particular temperature, vapor will evaporate from a liquid until the vapor pressure in the air reaches a certain point: the “equilibrium partial pressure.”) On the  $\text{SO}_2$  planet, the total air pressure will be pretty close to this equilibrium pressure.)

Thus, sulfur dioxide will behave rather like carbon dioxide on Mars. As I described in my June 1992 column, the pressure of  $\text{CO}_2$  in the Martian atmosphere is set by the equilibrium pressure over the solid  $\text{CO}_2$  at the Martian poles. Adding more  $\text{CO}_2$  to the Mars atmosphere doesn't raise the pressure—it just causes more  $\text{CO}_2$  to freeze out.

Not having oxygen in the atmosphere also makes higher life forms improbable. You probably can't run a large, multicelled organism without a high-energy metabolism . . . and burning food with oxygen makes for one of the highest-energy metabolisms around.

Microbes and simple plants ought to be possible, though. Elsewhere I've suggested that a “sulfur trioxide-sulfur dioxide” cycle could power microbes. “Plants” could store energy by making sulfur trioxide, say by some form of photosynthesis, and “animals” could react the sulfur trioxide with sulfur to give sulfur dioxide again. (In case you were going to ask, this cycle is utterly unknown

for any actual living things on Earth! I've just proposed it on the basis of the chemical energy it could store. Although some Earth bacteria metabolize sulfur compounds, they do so in a very different way.)

Even if higher life forms could exist, developing a sophisticated technology would be a problem, because without oxygen there will be no fire. Although  $\text{SO}_2$  is a fairly reactive compound, it's not nearly as reactive as oxygen. In fact, it's just about as inconvenient as possible:  $\text{SO}_2$  is just reactive enough to be pretty corrosive if you *do* manage to separate metal, yet it's not reactive enough to support a fire in the first place. (For most things, anyway: certain metals, if finely enough divided, will burn in  $\text{SO}_2$ . They include potassium, magnesium, and iron. Of course, all these will also burn in oxygen, at least under the right conditions: try sticking a piece of steel wool in a flame sometime!)

For an illustration of the problem, let's look at copper. Copper, like many familiar metals, has a high affinity for sulfur, so even on Earth most copper ores are just copper sulfides (mixed with a lot of other rock). And we'd certainly expect that copper sulfides could be present in the sulfur-world's crust. In fact, they might be a lot more common than on Earth, because there's so much sulfur around.

Now, how do we get metal out of sulfide ores? On Earth, we start by heating the sulfides in air (“roasting,” metallurgists call it). The sulfur reacts with oxygen to make  $\text{SO}_2$ , while the metal is left behind as an oxide. To free the metal, the oxide is “cooked” with carbon; the oxygen and carbon combine to make carbon monoxide and leave the metal behind.

Obviously none of this will work if the air contains no oxygen. So, as with ammonia, we have the worst of both worlds: no fire and no metal. Another world trapped in a Stone Age by the vagaries of the local chemistry. ♦

*I would like to dedicate this article, as well as the one last month, to the memory of Isaac Asimov, who helped inspire me—as he did so many others—with a love of science and its wonders.*

# The Four Rules of SF Humor

or: A Funny Thing Happened on My Way to the Hugo

Howard Zaharoff

For years I tried to sell science fiction stories, without success. I was frustrated, angry, depressed. Then one night, tossing and turning in bed, I had an inspiration that changed my life. Within weeks, I stopped being an unpublished writer of science fiction and became an unpublished writer of humor!

My secret? I discovered how to convert my unpublished science fiction *itself* into humor.

Of course, what worked for me might not work for you. For example, you might prefer to afford food and clothing. But if you have a drawer full of rejected science fiction tales and you don't mind going hungry and naked the next few years, then simply follow these Four Rules for SF Humor Success.

## 1. Know Science

Any writer of SF humor worth his sodium chloride must understand science, especially the Space Sciences (astronomy, physics, interior decorating). You needn't be an Einstein, or even a Hans Flederhofer (my 10th grade chemistry teacher, whose only successful experiment was melting sulfur to make penny molds). But if the word "chaos" reminds you of Maxwell Smart (Secret Agent 86); if the prefix "astro" calls to mind not nomy or nauts, but dome or turf; if you think Halley's Comet is a kitchen cleanser—SF humor is probably not for you.

## 2. Know Science Fiction

To make it in SF humor you must understand all aspects of science fiction. For example, you have to know the big names, like Cordwainer, Stanislaw, and Sucharitkul. You must know basic concepts: a Mad Scientist is *not* a physicist with a temper; the Three Laws of Robotics do *not* describe what motor oil to use; hyperspace is *not* especially anxious. You must know which works have—and haven't—made an impact in the genre: *Dune* and *Dune Messiah*, yes, *Dune Buggy*, no; and though it might have made a great sequel, Heinlein never wrote *Urp! The Stranger in a Strange Land Returns*.

Most important, you must know the genre's standard themes. For example, the most hackneyed arrow in every beginner's quiver is the story of the male-female colonizing team stranded on an uninhabited planet who turn out to be Adam and Eve. No sale there. So turn the tables on your readers. For instance, make the hero and heroine—get this—Ralph and Alice Kramden. I did that in my "To the Moon, Alice," which will be published in *Omní*, I'm sure, once I type it up and submit it. Which brings us to Rule 3.

## 3. Know the Science Fiction Markets

Science fiction is unique. It has the "Prozines" that pay top dollar, like *Omní* and *AMAZING*. It has

"Semiprozines" that pay a penny or two a word, like *Shadows* and *Whispers*. Then it has a bewildering array of amateur publications, or "Fan-zines," with names like *Free Spacer's Press*, *Star Rider and the Peace Machine*, and *The Rampant Guinea Pig* (I can document this) that pay \$5 to \$10 per story, or send copies only, or promise you a card on your birthday. To be a successful SF humorist, you must know all these markets.

For example, when my "Destination: Uranus" was rejected by the prozines and semiprozines, I didn't despair. Diligent marketing sold this saga of a spacefaring proctologist to *The Digest of Speculative Fiction*, *Peristalsis*, and *Animal Husbandry*. Although the payment was chicken feed, I had made my first sale!

Similarly, when the prozines missed the genius of my "alternate history," in which Jean-Paul Sartre and Stevie Wonder colonize Venus, I mailed it straight to *The Existentialists and Vocalists SF Gazetteer*. Payment here is low: 1/2 cent per story. (They sent me a full penny. I still owe them a story.) But nothing beats the excitement of seeing my "Teal of the Venetian Blind" in print.

## 4. Be Funny

The importance of the first three rules pales in comparison to this key rule. You must be funny. But how? you ask. Consider this ho-hum beginning from a rapid time-travel tale



featuring a 19th-century man of letters.

### TIMESCAPE

As I fled my pursuers, I pondered the irony of my situation. I was a 19th-century litterateur and scientist accustomed to viewing man as God's ultimate creation. Yet by traversing 10,000 years of history in my trans-temporal vehicle, I had witnessed the fall of Homo Sapiens and the rise of Domestic Bovine; the fall of Bos and the rise of Hollow-Horned Ruminants of Genus Capra; and the demise of the Ruminants and elevation of Lagomorpha. My experience strongly implied that Lagomorpha also would be supplanted in nature's history by another, more vibrant, species.

My ruminations were interrupted by the hole that loomed suddenly before me. Should I enter, or not? I barely had time to reflect when

close behind me arose the unmistakable alarums of *Oryctolagus Cuniculus*. I leaped into the abyss.

Darkness. A slow rumble, growing louder and closer. Twin specks of light, growing larger, bearing down on me. "Egads," I exclaimed. "A subterranean railway, probably used for public transportation!"

Now see how I rewrote this dull passage to feature a hip, 21st-century punster:

### TIMEHOP

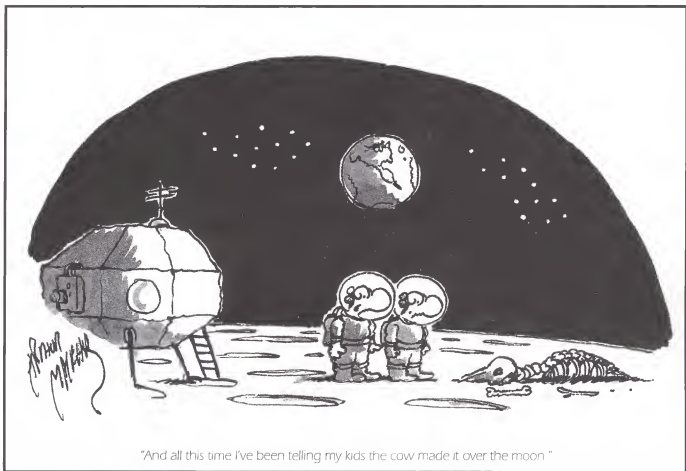
As I fled my pursuers, I felt the irony of my situation: I was a 21st-century bon vivant, used to supremacy over all creatures. Yet by traveling 9,800 years into the future, I had seen the fall of Man and rise of Cow (udder disaster!); the fall of Cow and rise of Goat (damned things nearly ate my time machine); and now, two subjective hours later, I was being

hunted by Goat's successor, Rabbit. But I knew that Rabbit, too, would pass. "Hare today," I thought with a smile, "gone tomorrow."

My thoughts were interrupted by the hole that loomed suddenly before me. Should I enter? I barely had time to think when a fusillade of carrots struck me on the back and tumbled me into the pit.

Darkness. A slow rumble, growing louder and closer. Twin lights grew larger. I strained my eyes till, in near panic, I saw a commuter train filled with bunnies bearing down on me. "Yipes," I yelled, "I'm trapped in their Rabbit Transit System!"

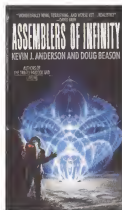
So if you, too, want to turn your SF dross into humorous gold, without people complaining how badly it smelt, just follow these four rules: learn science, science fiction, and the SF marketplace, and, like me, be hysterically funny. Good luck. ♦



"And all this time I've been telling my kids the cow made it over the moon."

# Tomorrow's Books

## February 1993 Releases



Compiled by Susan C. Stone  
and Bill Fawcett

**Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason: *Assemblers of Infinity*** Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. A frightening advancement in science, nanotechnology, creates microscopic machines that can construct anything . . . or destroy everything.

**Poul Anderson: *A Night of Ghosts and Shadows*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.99. Dominic Flandry, troubleshooter for the decaying Terran Empire, battles his lifelong enemy Aycharaych.

**Piers Anthony: *Demons Don't Dream*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$19.95. In the 16th Xanth novel, two escapees from Mundania are transported to the magical world of Xanth.

**Piers Anthony and Frances Hall: *Pretender*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.99. During the days of the Babylonian Empire, a stranded alien occupies the body of a young boy and guides his human host to a strange and fantastic destiny.

**Greg Bear: *Anvil of Stars*** Warner Questar SF, first time in pb, 480 pp, \$5.99. Sequel to *The Forge of God*. Exiles from the lifeless rubble that was once Earth hurtle through the galaxies in a quest for revenge.

**Greg Bear: *The Forge of God*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 480 pp, \$5.99. This SF epic begins with the disappearance of one of Jupiter's moons, and ends with the destruction of our planet.

**Veronica Black: *My Name is Polly Winter*** St. Martin's Mystery, hc, 192 pp, \$16.95. The disappearance of her own child, and the appearance of a child's ghost, lead a historical researcher to uncover a case of a vanished governess and child—forgotten since the 19th century.

**C. Dale Brittain: *The Wood Nymph and The Cranky Saint*** Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp. \$4.99. Sequel to *A Bad Spell in Yurt*. When the king grants the wizard Daimbert's wish for more authority, by going on vacation and leaving him in charge, Daimbert soon learns there's a lot to be said for the quiet life.

**C. Dale Brittain: *A Bad Spell in Yurt*** Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 320 pp. \$4.99. The slightly incompetent, newly appointed Royal Wizard to the Kingdom of Yurt must find a way to break the spell that has been cast upon his employer, or start looking for a new job.

**F. M. Busby: *The Singularity Project*** Tor SF, hc, 352 pp, \$21.95. A near-future SF story about con artists and businessmen, scientists and investors, and the invention of the first working matter transmitter, which will transform the world—if it's not a hoax.

**Ramsey Campbell: *Alone with the Horrors: The Great Short Fiction of Ramsey Campbell*** Arkham House, hc, 528 pp, \$26.95. A collection of horror short stories by Ramsey Campbell, with illustrations by J. K. Potter.

**Leonard Carpenter: *Conan of the Red Brotherhood*** Tor Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Sailing under the

flag of the Red Brotherhood, Conan carves out his own pirate empire.

**Scott Ciencin: *The Lotus and the Rose*** Warner Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Wolves of Autumn*. In a world uneasily shared by both humans and wolves, evil soulless beings threaten endless destruction led by a man whose touch is death.

**Helen Collins: *Mutagenesis*** Tor SF, hc, 352 pp, \$21.95. Adventure and intrigue on a planet where a geneticist from Earth and a talented artist repressed by her own country's patriarchal culture uncover a secret project that will change the nature of the human race.

**Melissa Crandall: *Star Trek #63: Shell Game*** Pocket Books, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. Trapped without power, the *Enterprise* crew must solve the mystery of a lifeless Romulan space station or suffer the same fate.

**John Dalmas: *The Regiment's War*** Baen SF, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. Book 3 in *The Regiment* series. In its first contract, the White Regiment is winning easily against the local army, until the wealthy aggressor nation hires the Black Regiment to test how well the White has learned its lessons.

**John Dalmas: *The Regiment*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 416 pp, \$4.95. Book 1 in *The Regiment* series. The planet Tyss has only one resource: soldiers. But they are very good soldiers.

**John Dalmas: *The White Regiment*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 416 pp, \$4.99. Book 2 in *The Regiment* series. When the Con-

## Key to Abbreviations

**hc**: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

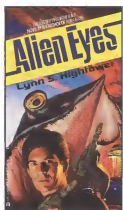
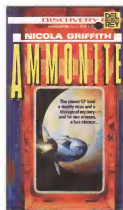
**pb orig**: paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

**pb reiss**: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

**pb rep**: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

**tr pb**: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



federation of Worlds wanted peace, they hired the finest mercenaries in the galaxy to train their first test regiment of great potential warriors.

**Bradley Denton: *Blackburn*** St. Martin's Press, hc, 304 pp, \$19.95. A novel about a killer with his own moral code—he kills only those he thinks deserve to die.

**J. M. Dillard: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*** Pocket Books, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. Novelization of the pilot episode of the new TV series. Deep Space Nine, a huge space station with almost instant access to the galaxy's newest frontiers, is a place where sworn enemies must learn to live and work side by side.

**Gardner Dozois, editor: *Modern Classics of Science Fiction*** St. Martin's Press, tr pb, 688 pp, \$15.95. Twenty-six contemporary masterworks of SF by some of the genre's greatest writers. Stories by William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Cordwainer Smith, Gene Wolfe, Roger Zelazny and others.

**Teresa Edgerton: *The Castle of the Silver Wheel*** Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Start of a new trilogy set in the world created in *Child of Saturn*. Only Qwenlliant's Wild Magic can bring peace to the lands of Mochdreff and Celydonn.

**Philip José Farmer: *Traitor to the Living*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 288 pp, \$4.99. MEDIUM is a device that can communicate with the dead. But what the dead want is to return to life, and through MEDIUM, maybe they can.

**Nigel Findley: *Shadowrun: Shadowplay*** Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. A veteran shadowrunner with dreams of retirement teams up with an Amerindian street kid to battle against the dark forces of corporate power.

**Robert L. Forward and Julie Forward Fuller: *Return to Rocheworld*** Baen SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99. Sequel

to *Rocheworld*. When the double planet shares oceans in a space waterfall, a dormant ecosystem is revived, awakening a sentient aquatic race, unfriendly to those intruding on their domain, including humans and the gentle flowen.

**Robert L. Forward: *Rocheworld*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 480 pp, \$4.99. When the first interstellar spaceship reached the double planet that circled Barnard's Star the human scientists aboard made contact with the flowen, hyperintelligent water-dwellers.

**R. García y Robertson: *The Spiral Dance*** AvoNova Fantasy, first time in pb, 256 pp, \$4.99. In the Elizabethan era, Anne Percy, Countess of Northumberland, rebels against the Crown and flees the Queen's wrath to cross a magical land in the company of a witch and a werewolf.

**David Gemmell: *Dark Prince*** Del Rey Fantasy, tr pb. Alexander was the only one who could restore magic to the creatures of Greece's legends—but only if he overcame the chaos spirit that battled for his soul.

**Lisa Goldstein: *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 304 pp, \$19.95. The Faerie Queen and her court invade London in Elizabethan times to fight a magical battle for the reborn King Arthur.

**Lisa Goldstein: *The Red Magician*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 192 pp, \$18.95. First hardcover publication of this American Book Award winning first fantasy novel, set in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust.

**Ed Gorman & Martin Harry Greenberg, editors: *Predators*** Roc Horror, tr pb orig, 352 pp, \$10.00. Follow up to the *Stalkers* anthology. Twenty-one more stories of predators and their prey. Stories by John Coyne, Dean Koonz, F. Paul Wilson, and others.

**Nicola Griffith: *Ammonite*** Del Rey SF Discovery, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. A woman anthropologist struggles to test a new vaccine against a virus that infects the planet GP, and is inevitably fatal to men.

**Ken Grimwood: *Replay*** Ace SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. World Fantasy Award Winner. At age 43 Jeff Winston died, only to be reborn repeatedly, with all his memories intact and the ability to change his decisions, relive his life, and affect the future of the world.

**Barbara Hambly: *Dog Wizard*** Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.99. Book 3 of *The Windrose Chronicles*. When someone begins tampering with the Void between the worlds, Antryg's enemies summon the rebel mage back from his exile in Los Angeles to fight against the unravelling of the universe.

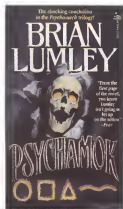
**Mary Herbert: *Valorian*** TSR, Inc. Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. The renegade leader of a tribe of nomadic horsemen uses his newfound magical abilities to unite his people against the tyrant who rules them.

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**Mercedes Lackey and Mark Shepherd: Wheels of Fire** Baen Fantasy, pb reiss, 400 pp, \$4.99. Second novel of the *Serrated Edge*. Good elves help a desperate mother search for her young son, kidnapped by his divorced father and a radical cult.

**Marc Laidlaw: Kalifornia** St. Martin's SF, hc, 256 pp, \$18.95. A satirical excursion into the State of the Future, where a teen heartthrob who can share every sensation through the wires with audiences across the world, must rescue the child of the future, the first human to be born wired, when she is kidnapped.

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**Stephen Leigh: Ray Bradbury Presents Dinosaur World** AvonNova SF, pb reiss, 304 pp, \$4.99. In this first volume in the series, three teenagers discover a dinosaur egg, and a mysterious pathway to a parallel world populated by intelligent dinosaurs.

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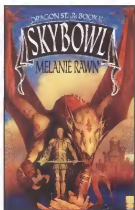
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**Melanie Rawn: *Skybowl*** DAW Fantasy, hc. *Dragon Star* Book III. Both High Prince Pol and the invading Warlord have sent out the call to mobilize their full force of warriors. And Pol's chosen battleground is the keep at Skybowl.

**Melanie Rawn: *Stronghold*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. *Dragon Star* Book I. A generation of peace is broken as an invasion force swarms across the land, bent on exterminating all Sunrunners.

**Melanie Rawn: *The Dragon Token*** DAW Fantasy, first time in pb, 664 pp, \$5.99. *Dragon Star* Book II. Will the might of Prince Rohan's warriors, Sunrunners' magic, and dragons, be enough to defeat both the invaders and the traitors in their own ranks?

**Melanie Rawn: *Dragon Prince*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. *Dragon Prince* Book I.

**Melanie Rawn: *The Star Scroll*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. *Dragon Prince* Book II.

**Melanie Rawn: *Sunrunner's Fire*** DAW Fantasy, pb reiss, \$5.99. *Dragon Prince* Book III.

**Mike Resnick & Gardner Dozois, editors: *Future Earths: Under African Skies*** DAW SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. A collection of stories about Africa in the future and African culture transplanted to different worlds. Includes works by Mike Resnick, Vernor Vinge, Gregory Benford, Bruce Sterling, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Howard Waldrop.

**Kim Stanley Robinson: *Red Mars*** Bantam SF, hc/tp orig, 496 pp, \$22.95 hc/\$11.95 tp. A hard SF novel about the colonization of Mars.

**Fred Saberhagen: *A Question of Time*** Tor Horror, first time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.99. A private detective is hired to locate a missing girl, lost in the Grand Canyon. To find her he must call on Mr. Strangeways, an Old Friend of the Family, to battle an undead menace from beyond time.

**Eluki bes Shahar: *Archangel Blues*** DAW SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. *Hellflower* book #3. Darktrader Butterfly St. Cyr and her hellflower partner Tiggy hunt the seemingly unkillable Governor-General Archangel before he can start a war.

**Eluki bes Shahar: *Hellflower*** DAW SF, pb reiss, \$3.99. *Hellflower* book #1. When darktrader Butterfly St. Cyr rescues the young hellflower mercenary Tiggy Stardust, even her illegal AI's ability to alter planetwide computer systems may not be enough to protect them from their enemies.

**Eluki bes Shahar: *Darktraders*** DAW SF, pb reiss, \$4.50. *Hellflower* book #2. With her AI computer off on a mission of his own, and only a hellflower mercenary everyone wants to assassinate as a partner, how long can darktrader Butterfly St. Cyr survive?

**Susan Schwartz: *The Grail of Hearts*** Tor Books, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. The Grail and Arthurian mythos are combined with the saga of the Wandering Jew in this story of deception and redemption.

**Sherwood Smith & Dave Trowbridge: *The Phoenix in Flight*** Tor SF, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.99. *Exordium* book #1. When Panarch, the ruler of a space empire, is captured, and all but one of his heirs killed, all that prevents his ene-

my from taking the throne is one ne'er-do-well young prince who somehow escaped and means to regain his father's empire.

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**Vernor Vinge: *A Fire Upon the Deep*** Tor SF, first time in pb, 640 pp, \$5.99. A spaceship crash on an unfamiliar world leaves two children at the mercy of a medieval lupine race. And a rescue mission races against time to retrieve the children and the weapon needed to prevent disaster.

**Paula Volsky: *Illusion*** Bantam Fantasy, first time in pb, 656 pp, \$5.99. Epic fantasy about an innocent young woman who learns to call upon her dormant magical powers as a bloody reign of terror destroys her world.

**H.G. Wells: *The War of the Worlds*** Tor Classic SF, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$2.50. The classic story of aliens from a dying planet who sweep down on Earth with advanced machines of destruction.

**Ann Tonsor Zeddies: *Sky Road*** Del Rey SF, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Deathgift*. After human soldiers destroyed Singer's tribe, he sought revenge. But to heal the wound in his soul, Singer would have to turn his powers to healing the hurts of the world.

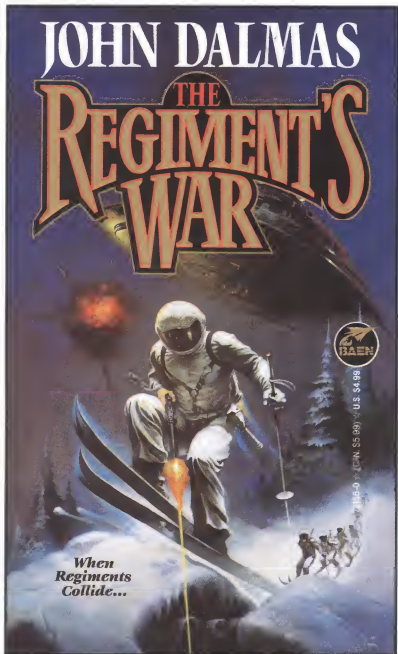
*Publishers of science fiction, fantasy, and horror books are invited to contribute material to this monthly listing. For more information, contact Bill Fawcett & Associates, 388 Hickory Road, Lake Zurich IL 60047.*

Looking Forward:

# The Regiment's War

by John Dalmas

Coming in February 1993 from Baen Books



*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

The Regiments are groups of mercenary soldiers that are trained by, and mostly made up of, members of a heavy-gravity species of humanity known as the T'swa.

In this third book of *The Regiment* series, John Dalmas introduces readers to a new group of soldiers—a regiment that is composed of more normal humans. In this excerpt, from the beginning of the story, members of the group—and particularly their leader—learn valuable lessons about honor and how to deal with the likelihood of defeat.

Colonel Artus Romlar lay listening behind a tree. There were many sounds. Just now, none seemed meaningful.

Insects buzzed and clicked and crawled. Sweat trickled. His shirt stuck to his back. He ignored them all. It was early spring in Oven's northern hemisphere, and the late morning temperature had risen well above a hundred. At least there was forest and shade, here in the Jubat Hills.

And the T'swa would be along soon. If he was wrong about that, he'd made a serious error.

Below him was a log landing on the Jubat Hills Railroad, a long strip of open ground used periodically for a rollaway. The ground sloped downward at 30 to 40 percent almost to the tracks, which here had been built along the bottom of a wide draw. Farther on, the draw became a steep-walled ravine; if the T'swa were going to detrain short of Tiiku Lod-Sei, this was the last good site.

The trick was to fool them into thinking he was somewhere else, hours away. Romlar considered he'd done that. The risk in

Cover art by W. Kelly

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not being at Junction 4 Village made it convincing. It was also the principal down side of his decision.

Regimental commanders don't customarily *lead* their troops into firefights, but this fight would be pivotal, perhaps decisive. The situation had become increasingly critical, the overall odds poor. He'd long since consolidated the men he had left into two battalions. If he lost in this week's set of engagements, his regiment would be—*not* finished, perhaps, but so reduced as to lose much of its effectiveness. And the Condoros, the people who'd hired it, would be beaten beyond hope. On the other hand, winning here decisively could carry them a while longer, and give them some sort of chance.

Of course, the T'swa might not come. In that case, he'd left 2nd Battalion, along with the Condoro allies, in a precarious position to little avail. Though he still might be able to hit the Booly positions by surprise, and even the odds a bit. That was another reason he was leading 1st Battalion personally: Its commander, Coy'n Carrmak, was the best officer he had, but to Romlar's thinking, he had to be present at this action himself, to know the result promptly, and as fully as possible.

The T'swa would come though, reportedly a fresh regiment, full strength. All he had to do—*all he had to do!*—was beat it soundly, cut it up badly with relatively few casualties of his own.

Meanwhile the Booly 2nd Division was sure to hit Junction 4 and its village today, with its two regiments of Condoro defenders and his own 2nd Battalion. If he were there with 1st Battalion . . . But if the T'swa were allowed to intervene, there was no chance at all of pulling the fat from the fire.

There were many ways to lose this war. There might or might not be a way to win it.

Romlar didn't run all this through his mind now. It was there, had entered into his decisions, and that was enough. He had committed. Now he lay quietly relaxed, waiting and watching, alert without effort. He'd been through this before. It seemed his reason for being.

He heard the locomotive now, a laboring steam engine chuffing up the long grade. Assuming he'd judged right, and he felt ninety percent sure he had, the train would slow and stop just here below him, and the T'swa would start getting out of the open-sided wooden cars. He'd open fire when about half were still on the cars and half on the ground. If the engineer started the train moving again, he'd be abandoning the men already off, and besides, the terrain became difficult along the tracks ahead, even for T'swa.

No, they'd detain here, then try to move back under fire, and that would spring the rest of his trap. They might well see it coming, but there'd be little they could do about it except fight furiously. Which in the case of the T'swa also meant intelligently and joyously. To them too, fighting was fulfillment, the spice of life.

He could feel his troopers waiting. There was, of course, the danger that the T'swa would feel them too. But *he* felt better knowing they were there. They were relaxed, too imbued with the T'sel to be anxious. Thus the T'swa were unlikely to sense them. Except for the

T'swa, there wasn't another fighting force in Confederation Space that could lie in wait like this and not be tense, not reek psychically. And except for the T'swa, he knew of no military force other than his that might detect that sort of thing.

The locomotive poked into sight, moving slowly, resinous woodsmoke issuing from the spark arrester on its stack. It wouldn't have to brake; the slope and the heavy gravity of Oven would stop it. With their typical energy and athleticism, T'swa began to pile out before the cars had totally stopped. Romlar leveled his bolt-action rifle, squeezed the trigger, and the ridge sides to both his left and right erupted with fire—rifles, grenade launchers, and light machine guns all firing blanks.

Referees with the T'swa began to move up and down the line, shouting and pointing, and men "died"—lay down, rolled over. Others were returning fire, and the referees with Romlar's 1st Battalion went into action too. But Romlar's men had the advantages of position and cover. Some of the T'swa took cover behind the cars' steel trucks and chassis, while others backed down the slope toward the limited cover of the trees—backing toward the other jaw—two machine gun platoons.

The T'swa weren't really surprised to receive a new surge of fire from behind. The exchange continued noisy and intense; the referees continued busy. After a few minutes more their whistles blew, ending the action. Most of the "surviving" T'swa were free of the trap now, having overrun the machine guns, and the real harvest was finished. The referees needed to confer, to sort out the confusion and define the casualties on both sides. Meanwhile both troopers and T'swa stopped where they were and waited.

While the referees conferred, Romlar washed down a "sweet capsule" with a swallow of warm water, then got on the radio to Brossling, who'd kept comm silence till then because their frequency might be monitored. The Boolies had hit them, Brossling said, but the assault hadn't been as bad as expected. The referees there had agreed that 2nd Battalion and the Condoro had driven them off with fairly heavy Booly casualties and only modest casualties of their own. Modest because they were dug in, and because they hadn't let themselves be overrun.

Romlar's own casualties, the referees announced, had been relatively modest too, considering it was T'swa they'd ambushed. T'swa in their prefinal year of training, most of them seventeen years old. When the whistles blew again, the surviving T'swa would regroup and do whatever their commander decided. Romlar would move his men back to the abandoned logging camp at Junction 4, fifteen miles away. A camp that, in the never-never land of the training exercise, served as the nucleus of the mocked-up Condoro village at Junction 4, whose rough wagon road gave logistical access to the principal pass through this part of the Jubat Hills. The Condoros, like the Boolies, were mostly imaginary of course, represented by T'swa veterans, survivors of retired regiments, pretending to be non-T'swa. Veterans each of whom, for the purpose of the exercise, represented a Condoro or Booly platoon.

It was all as real as it could reasonably be made, but given the genuine and bloody fighting his regiment had been through on Terfrefya, five years earlier, the difference had always been conspicuous to Romlar. Nonetheless, the regiment had learned a great deal in those five additional training years, learned much more than simple strategy, tactics, and fighting techniques.

Romlar had lost thirty-two percent of his command on Terfrefya—real deaths by violence, not pretended deaths by referees' decisions—and like the T'swa, the "White T'swa" did not replace their casualties. But allowing for that short-handedness, he had no doubt that this regiment, under his leadership, was as good as any regiment in Confederation Space, whether at War Level One, Two, or Three. Which were all the levels the Confederation conceded.

True the T'swa were physically stronger than his men; they'd been born to this world's heavy gravity, as had their ancestors for a hundred generations. And his men would graduate with six years less training, though the Ostrak Procedures, and six years of work under T'swa cadres, had brought them close. Especially given the months of bloody combat on Terfrefya. Perhaps more important, particularly in a Level 3 War where night visors were prohibited, *Homo tyssiensis* had considerably better night vision than other humans.

*But under his leadership . . .* Numerous T'swa officers were his equals in strategy and tactics, Romlar knew, and at spotting importances. But no one outguessed him, outpredicted him. That was his edge. Even in training it didn't always bring victory, but it was as good an edge as he could hope for.

The referees' whistles shrilled again, blowing the two forces back into action, and Romlar's buglers called a withdrawal. His major advantages here were gone now; it was time to get back to Junction 4.

The Game Master had declared the "war" over. The Condaros had broken, and with that the greatly outnumbered regiment had been chewed up. First Romlar, and later Carmak and Brossling had been "killed" in T'swa night assaults, and Eldren Esenrok, still and always cocky, had led what was left of the troopers.

Now the entire regiment, survivors and casualties, sat together in the Great Hall to hear their efforts critiqued. Sat facing the Grand Master and the board of Masters. Tiers of wooden benches, dark and smooth, rose on three sides, holding other regiments in advanced training, those which were on base. The hall was well lit by T'swa standards, but the light was ruddy as a campfire. The timbered roof was high and dark, unpainted and with massive beams, its corners shadowed. All in all it felt primordial, despite the large viewscreen on the wall at one end.

Grand Master Kliss-Bahn was ancient, his frame still large but its covering shrunken. His naturally short hair, long since white, had become thin and soft, and like himself no longer stood straight. He'd commanded the legendary Black Tiger Regiment in its time, survived its

gradual shrinkage and final destruction, and had been overseeing training in one capacity or another for sixty-eight standard years.

His critique was direct, detailed, and generally favorable. When he'd finished, he turned his large, luminous black eyes on Romlar, who as regimental commander stood front and center facing him. "Now," said Kliss-Bahn, "let us hear from Colonel Romlar. Colonel, you may comment at any reasonable length on this exercise. And because it was your final exercise, feel free to address your training overall. Colonel?"

Romlar stood. He was rather tall, and massive for an Iryalan—as big as most T'swa. "Thank you, Master Kliss-Bahn. I'll keep it short. This exercise was a lesson in fighting for a losing cause of little merit, a lesson in dying with integrity." He grinned. "It was an interesting experience."

"As for our overall training—T'swa warriors have not only trained us; they've inspired us and have been role models for us. And T'swa masters of wisdom have done much to expand us in the T'sel during the three years we've spent on your world. Basic to all that were the Ostrak Procedures, received from counselors of our own species in our first year of training. But even the Ostrak Procedures grew out of training in the T'sel, received by Iryalans here on Tyss six centuries ago. So it all comes down to Tyss, the T'swa, and the T'sel."

He looked around, scanning the black faces, the reflective eyes. "We are not truly T'swa," he went on. "Our scripting and imprinting have been different. The Ostrak Procedures, and our training by your lodge and by the Order of Ka-Shok, have made us close cousins to the T'swa; in most ways we have become closer to you than to our families, or to the friends of our childhood. But we remain Confederatswa, and more specifically Iryalans.

"We will go somewhere to fight soon, taking with us what we have learned from you. What we have learned not only about the art of war, but of the T'sel, of ethics, of integrity.

"As the T'swa well know and fully intended, the T'sel is infiltrating the Confederation, particularly at the top and most particularly on Iryala. In time, wars will cease; that is the direction the T'sel moves us, now that the hold of the sacrament is beginning to crumble in the Confederation. In lives to come—perhaps not the next, or the one after that, but in some future life—we will do things beyond our present dreaming. But for this life we are warriors born and trained, and we will practice our profession as skillfully and ethically as we can, taking pleasure in its challenges and actions.

"Because we are Confederatswa, we will no doubt do some things differently than you would. But we will always act according to the T'sel. We thank you for all you have given us, and should it happen that we meet some of you in battle, we will not disappoint you."

As Romlar sat down, the T'swa regiments stood, clapping in the T'swa manner, strongly, rhythmically, large palms cupped, the sound resonant in the hall. A rush pebbled the young colonel's skin. ♦

Looking Forward:

# Dark Prince

by David Gemmell

Coming in February 1993 from Del Rey Books

*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

This novel by internationally renowned author David Gemmell weaves the mythic tale of Alexander the Great and Parmenion, a Spartan outcast and one of the age's greatest generals. Certainly one of the most brilliant fictional accounts of Alexander's life ever written, the book combines elements of mythology, fantasy, and history into what may someday become a classic of British fantasy literature.

The following excerpt introduces several of the major players in the saga: young Alexander, his parents, and . . . of course . . . Parmenion himself.

Pella, Macedonia, Summer

The golden-haired child sat alone, as he usually did, and wondered whether his father would die today. Some distance away, across the royal gardens, his nurse was talking to the two sentries who guarded him during daylight. The soldiers, grim-eyed warriors, did not look at him and shifted nervously if he approached.

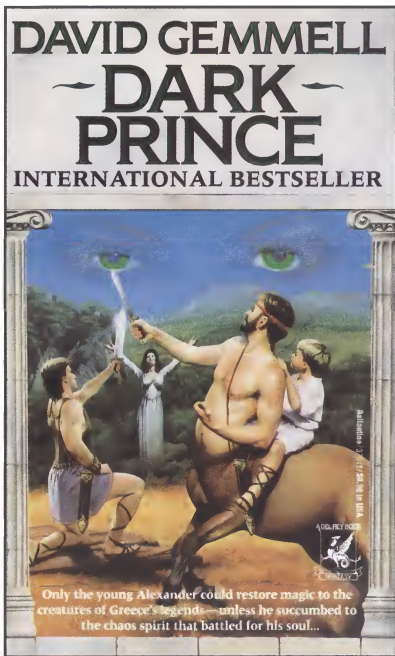
Alexander was used to this reaction. Even at four he understood it.

He remembered with sadness the day three weeks ago when his father, garbed for war, had walked along this same garden path, his cuirass gleaming in the sunlight. It was so beautiful that Alexander had reached out to touch the gleaming plates of iron. But as his hand came forward Philip had moved swiftly back.

"Don't touch me, boy!" he snapped.

"I would not hurt you, Father," whispered the prince, staring up at the black-bearded face, with its blind right eye like a huge opal beneath the savagely scarred brow.

"I came to say goodbye," muttered Philip, "and to tell you to be good. Learn your lessons well."



Cover art by Tim Stimson

"Will you win?" the child asked.  
"Win or die, boy," answered the King, kneeling to face his son. He appeared to relax, though his expression remained stern. "There are those who think I cannot win. They remember Onomarchus defeated me when last we met. But . . ."—his voice dropped to a whisper—"when the arrow tore into my eye at the siege of Methone they said I would die. When the fever struck me down in Thrace men swore my heart stopped beating. But I am Macedon, Alexander, and I do not die easily."

"I don't want you to die. I love you," said the child.  
For a moment only Philip's face softened, his arm rising as if to reach out to his son. But the moment passed and the King stood. "Be good," he said. "I will . . . think of you."

The sound of children's laughter brought Alexander's thoughts back to the present. Beyond the garden walls he could hear the palace children playing. Sighing, he wondered what game they were enjoying. Hunt? The Turtle perhaps, or Hecate's Touch. He watched them sometimes from the window of his room. One child would be chosen as Hecate, Goddess of Death, and would chase the others, seeking out their hiding places, to touch them and make them slaves. The game would go on until all the children had been found and enslaved by Death.

Alexander shivered in the sunshine. No one would ask him to play such a game. He looked down at his small hands.

He had not meant the hound to die; he had loved the pup. And he had tried so hard, concentrating always, so that whenever he stroked the dog his mind was calm. But one day the playful hound had leapt at him, knocking him from his feet. In that moment Alexander's hand had snaked out, lightly slapping the beast on the neck. The hound collapsed instantly, eyes glazing, legs twitching. It had died within seconds, but what was worse it had decomposed within minutes, the stench filling the garden.

"It was not my fault," the child wanted to say. But he knew that it was; knew that he was cursed.

Birds began to sing in the tall trees and Alexander smiled as he looked up at them. Closing his green eyes, the boy allowed the bird-song to flow into him, filling his mind, merging with his own thoughts. The songs began to have meanings then, that he could just decipher. No words but feelings, fears, tiny angers. The birds were screeching warnings to one another.

Alexander looked up and sang: "My tree! My tree! Get away! Get away! My tree! My tree! I will kill you if you stay!"

"Children should not sing of killing," said his nurse sternly, approaching where he sat but halting, as ever, out of reach.

"That is what the birds are singing," he told her.  
"You should come inside now. The sun is very hot."  
"The children are still playing beyond the wall," he argued. "And I like to sit here."

"You will do as you are told, young prince!" she snapped. His eyes blazed and he could almost hear the dark voice within himself whispering: "Hurt her! Kill her!" He swallowed hard, quelling the rising tide of anger.

"I will come," he said softly. Rising to his feet, he walked towards her, but she stepped quickly aside to let him pass, following him slowly as he returned to his own rooms. Waiting until she had gone, Alexander slipped out into the corridor and ran to his mother's apartments, pushing open the door to peek inside.

Olympias was alone and she smiled as he entered, opening her arms to him. He ran forward and embraced her, pushing his face against the soft flesh of her bosom. There was never anyone, he knew, so beautiful as his mother, and he clung to her fiercely.

"You are very hot," said Olympias, pushing back his golden hair and stroking his brow. Filling a cup with cool water, she passed it to him, watching as he drank.

"Did your lessons go well today?" she asked.

"There were no lessons, Mother. Stagra is ill. If I had a pony, would it die?"

He saw the pain on her face as, pulling him to her, she patted his back. "You are not a demon, Alexander. You have great gifts; you will be a great man."

"But would the pony die?"

"I think that it might," she admitted. "But when you are older you will know how to control . . . the Talent. Be patient."

"I don't want to kill anything. Yesterday I made a bird fly to my hand. It sat for a long time before flying away. It didn't die. Truly!"

"When your father returns to Pella we will all go to the sea, and sail on boats. You will like that. The breeze is cool, and we will swim."

"Is he coming back?" Alexander asked. "Some people say he will die against the Phocians. They say his luck is finished, that the gods have deserted him."

"Hush!" she whispered. "It is not wise to voice such thoughts. Philip is a great warrior—and he has Parmenion."

"The Phocians beat him before, two years ago," said the boy. "Two thousand Macedonians dead. And now the Athenians raid our coastline and the Thracians have turned against us."

She nodded and sighed. "You hear too much, Alexander."

"I don't want him to die . . . even though he doesn't like me."

"You must not say that! Ever!" she cried, seizing his shoulders and shaking him hard. "Never! He loves you. You are his son. His heir."

"You are hurting me," he whispered, tears in his eyes.

"I am sorry," she told him, drawing him into her arms. "There is so much I wish I could tell you, explain to you. But you are very young."

"I would understand," he assured her.

"I know. That is why I cannot tell you."

For a while they sat in silence, Alexander warm and sleepy in his mother's arms. "I can see them now," he said dreamily. "There is a plain covered with flowers of purple and yellow. And there is Father in his golden armor. He is standing beside the grey gelding, Achea. And there are the enemy. Oh, Mother, there are thousands of them. I can see their shields. Look! There is the sign of Sparta, and there the Owl of Athens and . . . I don't know

that one, but I can see the emblems of Pherai and Corinth . . . so many. How can Father beat them all?"

"I don't know," whispered Olympias. "What is happening now?"

"The battle begins," answered the child.

## The Crocus Field, Summer

Philip of Macedon rubbed at the scar above his blinded right eye and stared out over the Phocian battle-lines half a mile ahead. More than 20,000 infantry were massed on the plain, 1,000 cavalry behind and to the right of the main force. He transferred his gaze to the Macedonian lines, where 15,000 foot-soldiers waited in formation at the center, his 3,000 cavalry to the left and right.

Everywhere there were flowers growing, some purple and yellow, others white and pink, and in that moment it seemed to the King almost inconceivable that within minutes hundreds—perhaps thousands—of men would lay down their lives, their blood soaking into the earth. And he felt, with sudden regret, it was almost as great a crime against the gods of beauty that these flowers would soon be trampled into the dust beneath the pale grass of the Crocian Plain. "Don't be foolish," he told himself. "You chose this battleground." It was flat and made for cavalry, and Philip now commanded the Thesalian lancers, the finest horse-soldiers in Greece.

Two days ago, during a lightning march across the shallows of the River Penios, the Macedonian army surprised the defenders of the port city of Pagasai. The city had fallen within three hours. By sunset the Macedonians manning the ramparts had seen a fleet of Athenian battle triremes sailing serenely across the gulf. But with Pagasai taken the triremes had nowhere to dock, and the soldiers they carried were lost to the enemy cause.

Now, with the rear secured against an Athenian attack, Philip felt more confident of the coming battle. There was nowhere this time for Onomarchus to hide his giant catapults; no steep, tree-shrouded mountains from which he could send death from the skies.

Today it would be different. Today the odds were more even.

And he had Parmenion . . .

Glancing to his left, Philip sought out the Spartan, watching him ride along the flank, talking to the riders, calming the younger men and lifting the spirits of the veterans.

A momentary anger touched Philip. The Spartan had come to Macedonia's aid seven years ago, when the nation was beset by enemies on all sides. His strategic skills had been vital then, and he had trained Philip's fledgling army, turning them from farmers and peasants into the most feared fighting force in the civilized world.

"I loved you then," thought Philip, remembering the heady days of victory over the Illyrians to the west, the Paionians to the north. City after city had fallen to Macedonia as her strength grew. But always the victories belonged to Parmenion, the *strategos*, the man whose battle plans had won victories for a quarter of a century, in Thebes, in Phrygia, in Cappadocia and Egypt.

Philip shaded his good eye and strained to see the Phocian center, where Onomarchus would be standing with his bodyguard. But the distance was too great, the sun gleaming from too many breastplates, shields and helms for him to pick out his enemy.

"What I would not give to have your neck under my blade," he whispered.

"Did you speak, sire?" asked Attalus, the King's Champion. Philip turned to the cold-eyed man beside him.

"Yes—but only to myself. It is time. Order the advance!"

Philip strode to the grey gelding, taking hold of the mane and vaulting to the beast's back. The gelding whinnied and reared, but Philip's powerful legs were locked to the barrel of its belly. A young soldier ran forward carrying Philip's high-crested helm of iron. The King took it in his hands, gazing down at the burnished face of the goddess Athena which decorated the forehead. "Be with me today, lady," he said, placing the helmet upon his head. Another man lifted Philip's round shield, and the King slid his left arm through the leather straps, settling it in place on his forearm.

The first four regiments, 11,000 men, began the slow march towards the enemy.

Philip glanced to where Parmenion waited on the left with 2,000 cavalry and two regiments of reserves. The Spartan waved to his King, then transferred his gaze to the battlefield.

Philip's heart was hammering now. He could still taste the bitterness of defeat when last he had met Onomarchus. It was a day like this one—brilliant sunshine, a cloudless sky—when the Macedonians had marched against the enemy. Only then there were mountains on either side, and they had contained hidden siege-engines which hurled huge boulders down upon the Macedonians, smashing their formation, crushing bones and destroying lives. Then the enemy cavalry charged, and the Macedonians had fled the field.

Long would Philip remember that day. For six years he had seemed invincible, victory following victory as if divinely ordained. And one terrible hour had changed everything. For the first time in his life, Philip had failed.

What was more galling even than defeat was the fact that Parmenion was not present. He was leading a force into the northwest to put down an Illyrian insurrection.

For six years the King had been forced to share his victories with his general, but the one defeat was his—and his alone.

Now Philip shook himself clear of his memories. Two hundred paces to the right of Philip's position the Second General, Antipater, was waiting with 1,000 cavalymen. Philip tugged on the gelding's reins and rode to take his position alongside him in the front line.

Drawing his sword, he led the cavalry forward at a walk, angling to the right of the advancing infantry.

"Now they come!" yelled Antipater, pointing to the Phocian cavalry. The enemy horsemen, spears leveled, were charging towards them.

"Macedon!" bellowed Philip, kicking the gelding into a gallop, all his fears vanishing as the Macedonians thundered across the plain. ♦

# Kingdoms of the Wall

From the author's forthcoming novel  
of the same name

Robert Silverberg

## Prologue/Synopsis

On an alien world in a double-sun system, the zone inhabited by the humanoid natives is a tropical jungle at the base of a colossal mountain known as Kosa Saag, or the Wall. They believe that their gods dwell at the summit of the Wall, and each year the villagers send forty young people—chosen through years of grueling training and steady elimination of the unfit—to climb the Wall and pay homage to the gods. Of each group of forty, scarcely any ever return, and those who do are in such a state of exaltation that it is virtually indistinguishable from madness; but to be a pilgrim is the highest honor a villager can achieve, and virtually everyone aspires



Illustration by Mark Skullerud



to be a member of the Forty that will depart in the year he or she comes of age.

The narrator is Poilar—sturdy, self-reliant, opinionated—who despite the handicap of a crooked leg had been certain from childhood that he would be chosen for the Pilgrimage, as his father and grandfather had before him. Along with his closest friend, the timid, scholarly Traiben, he enrolls in the training for the Pilgrimage.

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We were down to a hundred candidates, ninety, eighty, seventy. It was a strange time for those of us who remained. We were all fiercely pledged to the Pilgrimage: anyone who might weaken and drop out had already done so, and anyone clumsy or careless enough to be killed or injured in the course of the training was long gone from our midst. We who had lasted this long meant to stay the course. A powerful kind of comradeship had developed among us. But there were still too many of us; and so we eyed our dearly loved comrades with unashamed ferocity, privately thinking, *May the gods blight you tomorrow, may your soul drain out of your body like a trickle of cold water, may you fall from the cliff and shatter both your legs, may your courage desert you entirely. Anything, so long as you cease to stand in my way.* Then we would smile, because everyone knew that everyone else was thinking the same things about him that he was thinking about them.

And at last the day of reckoning came, the tenth of Slit, which is exactly half a year prior to the day of the start of the new year's Pilgrimage. At dawn of that day the Masters came to us where we slept and woke some of us, including Traiben and me, and took us to Pilgrim Lodge, and thereby we knew that we had been chosen. I felt none of the ecstatic joy that my boyhood self would have expected, only a mild flicker of satisfaction. I had worked too long and too hard for this to be capable of reacting with any great emotion now. One phase of my life had ended, the next was beginning, that was all. Once those great wickerwork doors had closed behind us, we would not go out into the sunlight again nor see any living person other than ourselves until the tenth of Elgamoir, when we would begin our ascent.

I was not surprised to see that Kilarion the Builder had been chosen. He was the biggest of us by far, and the strongest: a little slow-witted except when it came to his own trade, but a good man to have with you in a difficult spot. The selection of Jaif the Singer pleased me also, for he was calm-natured, steadfast, and reliable. But why had the Masters given us sly, slippery little Kath, of the House of Advocates? Kath was good at talking, yes, but what use would a glib tongue be on the slopes of the Wall? Or someone as hot-blooded and impulsive as Stapp of Judges, in such a dangerous environment? Naxa the Scribe, too: why had they picked him? He was clever, nearly as clever as Traiben, but he was pedantic and obnoxious and there was no one who liked him. And then there were a few others—Thuiaman of the Metalworkers, Dorn of the House of Clowns, Narril the Butcher—who

were decent enough sorts but of no particular distinction or merit, and they would not have been among my first choices if I had been a Master. Then Muurmut of the Vintners, a tall, stubborn, red-faced man, tough-willed and full of strong opinions but often wrong-headed and rash—would he be any asset to a group such as ours? But something Traiben had said years before still burned in my mind: we Pilgrims were not necessarily the finest that the village had to offer. Some of us might have been sent to the Wall simply to get rid of us. I might be one of those myself, for all I knew.

During our time in Pilgrim Lodge we twenty men were kept apart, as always, from the twenty women in the adjoining chamber. That was hard, going so long without mating: since my fourteenth year I hadn't known more than a few days of abstinence, and here we were condemned to half a year of it. But the years of training had so annealed my soul that I was able to handle even that.

At first we had no idea who our female counterparts in the other chamber might be. But then Kath found a speaking-hole that linked one chamber to the other, high up on the wall in the dark storeroom in the rear of the lodge, and by standing three men high, Kilarion with Jaif on his shoulders and Kath on Jaif's, we were able to make contact with the women on the other side. Thus I learned that my robust old friend Galli was among the Forty, and delicate narrow-eyed Thissa, she whose skill was for witchcraft, and the remote and moody woman called Hendy, who fascinated me because in childhood she had been stolen away to our neighbor village of Tipkeyn and had not returned to us until her fourteenth year. And the sweet Tenilda of the Musicians, and Stum of the Carpenters, and Min the Scribe, all of them old friends of mine, and some others, like Grycindil the Weaver and Marsiel the Grower, whom I did not know at all.

We waited out our time. It was like being in prison. We did some things of which it would not be proper for me to speak, for only those who are about to be Pilgrims may know of them. But most of the time we were idle. That is the nature of the time in Pilgrim Lodge. Mainly it is a time of waiting. We had exercise rungs in Pilgrim Lodge, and used them constantly. To amuse ourselves in the long dull hours we speculated on the nature of the meals that came through the slots in the doors twice a day, but it was always the same, gruel and beans and grilled meat. There was never any wine with it, nor gaith-leaves to chew.

We sang. We paced like caged beasts. We grew restless and listless. And in fact we held our own, and even went from strength to strength, as the final weeks of our time in Pilgrim Lodge ticked away. Impatient as I was to begin my Pilgrimage, I remember attaining at the same time a kind of cool serenity that carried me easily through the last days, and if you ask me how one can be impatient and serene at the same time I can give you no real answer, except to say that perhaps only one who is a member of the Forty is capable of such a thing. I even lost track of the days, toward the end. So did we all, all but Naxa, who was marking out the time in some private

Scribe-like way of his, and who announced at last, "This is the ninth day of Elgamoir."

"The eighth, I make it to be," said Traiben mildly.

"Well, then, so even the brilliant Traiben can be wrong once in a while," said Naxa in triumph. "For I tell you by the beard of Kreshe that this is the ninth, and tomorrow we will be on Kosa Saag."

Traiben looked disgruntled, and muttered something to himself. But that night when the slots in the doors opened and our dinner trays were pushed through, we saw bowls of steaming hammon and great slabs of roasted kreyll and tall pitchers of the foaming golden wine of celebration, and we knew that Naxa's count of days had been right and Traiben for once was in error, for this was the feast of Departure that they had brought us and in the morning our Pilgrimage would at last commence.

The final rite of our stay in Pilgrim Lodge took place at dawn: the Sacrifice of the Bond. We were all awake and waiting when the slots opened for the last time and a beautiful young grezbor came wriggling through, a sleek pink-hoofed one with dazzling white wool, not your ordinary farm grezbor but one of the prized purebred ones of the temples. After it, on a golden tray, came the silver knife of the Bond.

We knew what we were supposed to do. But in the face of the actual fact we looked uneasily at each other. The grezbor seemed to think it was all a game, and went trotting around from one of us to another, nuzzling against our knees, accepting our caresses. Then Narril picked up the knife and said, "Well, considering that it's a skill of my House—"

"No," said Muurmut brusquely. "Not a Butcher, not for this. We need some style here."

And he took the knife from Narril before Narril realized what was happening, and held it aloft, and waved it solemnly toward this side of the room and that one.

"Bring me the animal," he said in a deep, dramatic tone.

I gave him a contemptuous look. Muurmut seemed both foolishly pompous and grandly impressive, but rather more pompous than grand. Still, the Sacrifice had to be carried out, and he had taken possession of the rite, and that was all there was to it. Kilarian and Stum grabbed the poor beast and brought it to Muurmut, who stood very tall in the center of the room. Muurmut turned the knife so that it glinted in the light of the window overhead and said in a rich formal voice, "We offer up the life of this creature now as a bond between us, that we should all love one another as we set forth in our high endeavor." Then he spoke the words of the slaughtering-prayer as any Butcher might have done and made a swift cut with the knife. A line of crimson blossomed from the throat of the grezbor. It was a good clean killing: I give Muurmut credit for that much. I saw Traiben look away; and I heard a quick little gasp of dismay from Hendy.

Then Muurmut held the body forward and we came toward it one by one, and dipped our fingers in the blood and smeared it on our cheeks and forearms as the

tradition required, and we swore to love one another in the ordeal ahead. Why must we do this? I wondered. Did they fear we would become enemies on the mountain, without the oath? But we rubbed the blood on each other as though it was really needed. And in time I would come to see that indeed it had been.

"Look," Jaif said. "The doors—"

Yes. They were swinging open now.

I felt nothing, nothing at all, as I came forth from Pilgrim Lodge that morning and stepped forward into the Procession. I had spent too much of my life waiting for this moment; the moment itself had become incompressible.

Of course there was plenty of *sensation*. I remember the blast of hot moist air as I came through the doorway, and the fierce light of Ekmelios jabbing me in the eyes, and the sharp bitter smell of thousands of damp sweaty bodies. I heard the singing and the chanting and the music. I saw the faces of people I knew in the viewing-stand just opposite the roundhouse of the Returned Ones, where Traiben and I had been sitting eight years before on that day when we first vowed that we would achieve the Pilgrimage. But though a million individual details struck my senses and engraved themselves permanently upon my memory, none of it had any meaning. I had been locked up; now I was coming out into town; and I was about to go for a walk.

A walk, yes.

Because I was of the House of the Wall, I was the first one out of the Lodge and I was the one who would lead the group of Pilgrims in the Procession: naturally Wall always goes first, Singers second, then Advocates, Musicians, Scribes, and so on in the prescribed order that was set down thousands of years ago. Traiben, because he was of the Wall also, walked just behind me: he had felt too shy at the last to want to be first. Beside me on the right was the only woman of my House who had been chosen, Chaliza of Moonclan. I had never liked her much and we didn't look at each other now.

Procession Street in front of me was empty. Everyone else had passed through already, the heads of the Houses and the doublelifers and the Returned Ones and the jugglers and musicians and all the rest. I put one foot in front of the other and set out down the street toward the center of town, toward the plaza with the bright-leaved szambar tree, toward the road to Kosa Saag.

My mind was empty. My spirit was numb. I felt nothing, nothing at all.

The heads of all the Houses were waiting in the plaza, ringing the szambar tree. As tradition required, I went to each one in turn, touching the tips of my hands to theirs and getting little smudges of blood on them: first Meribail, the head of my own House, and then Sten of Singers, Galin of Advocates, and so on in the proper order. Our kinsmen were there to pay their farewells, also. I embraced my mother, who seemed to be very far away. She spoke vaguely of the day when she had stood by the same scarlet-leaved tree to say goodbye to my father as he was about to set out on the Pilgrimage from which

he did not return. Beside her was my mother's brother, he who had raised me like a father, and all he had to say to me now was, "Remember, Poilar, the Wall is a world. The Wall is a universe." Well, yes, so it is, Urillin; but I would have preferred some warmer words than those, or at least something more useful.

When we had finished the circuit of the szambar tree and had spoken with all those who waited there to see us off, we were far around to the other side of the plaza, looking toward the mountain road. The golden carpets had been laid, stretching on and on and on like a river of molten metal. The sight of them broke through my trance at last: a shiver went down my middlebone and I thought for a moment I would start to weep. I looked toward Chaliza. Her face was wet with the shining streaks of tear-trails. I smiled at her and nodded toward the mountain.

"Here we go," I said.

And so we went upward into the land of dreams, into the place of secrets, the mountain of the gods.

Step and step and step and step. You take one, and another, and another and another, and that is how you climb. From all sides we heard cheers of encouragement, shouts of praise, the clangor of jubilant music. The shouts came even from behind us, where the candidates who had not stayed the course humbly walked, as the tradition requires, carrying our baggage. I glanced back once and was amazed to see how many of them there were. Thousands, yes. Eyes gleaming with our reflected glory. Why were they not bitter and envious? Thousands of them, whose candidacies had failed: and we alone, we few, had won the prize that all had sought.

Everyone knows the lower reaches of the road. The ancient white paving-stones are smooth and wide and the palisade lining the road is bright with yellow banners. Taking care to walk only on the golden carpet of honor, we passed through the heart of the town and down into the place where the road descends a little before it turns sharply upward again; and then we were at Roshten Gate, where the guards stood saluting us, and one by one we touched our hands to the Roshten milepost to mark our departure from the village and the real beginning of our ascent. I still led the way, although we no longer held strict formation and Kilarion and Jaif and some of the others came up to walk beside me. Already the air seemed fresher and cooler, though we had hardly begun to climb.

Kosa Saag filled the entire sky in front of us.

You hardly perceive that it is a mountain, once you are on it. It becomes the world. You have no sense of its height. It is simply a wall, *the* Wall, a wall that stands between you and the unknown regions of the world on the other side. And after a time you cease to think of it as something vertical. It unfolds before you as a long winding road, going on and on and on and on and generally not rising as steeply before you as you might expect, and you take it one step at a time without thinking of all that lies ahead of you, for you know that if you allow yourself to think of anything more than the next step, and maybe the one after that, you will lose your mind.

We went quickly through the mileposts we all knew: Ashten, Glay, Hesperen, Sennt. Certainly every one of us had been up this far at some time or other at holiday times when the Wall is open for the sacred ceremonies in honor of He Who Climbed, and probably we had all come sneaking up here on our own now and then as Galli and I had done. At each milepost marker there was a little prayer to say, since each is sacred to some particular god. But we paused as briefly as we could to get these said, and moved along. As we went up I looked over at Galli, and she grinned at me as if to tell me that she too remembered the time we had come this way together as children, and had made the Changes on the bed of moss back of Hithiat. Thinking of that day now, I remembered the feel of Galli's breasts in my hands and the wriggling of her tongue in my mouth and I wondered if she would want to play a few Changes with me that night when we camped. For it was half a year since I had had a mating, and in my mood just then I could have done Changes with all twenty of the women of our Pilgrimage without pausing to catch my breath.

But we had more climbing to do, first.

It was all easy and familiar. The Wall road below Hithiat is kept in good repair and the grade is gentle, as mountain roads go; and as I have said we had all been up here many times. We moved along at a good steady clip, joking and laughing, pausing now and then at the lookout points to see the village becoming ever tinier below us. If the laughter was occasionally louder than the jokes seemed to merit, well, so be it: we were excited and eager, and the mountain air, already fresher than the muggy air of the village, exhilarated us. I remember one of the women—Grycindil the Weaver, I think it was, or perhaps it was Stum the Carpenter—coming up alongside me and saying gleefully, "Suppose they lied to us, and the road is this easy all the way to the top! Suppose we're at the Summit by tomorrow afternoon, Poilar! How fine that would be!"

I had been wondering the same thing myself: Is this all there is to it? Will it be no harder than this, right to the Summit?

"Yes, how fine that would be," I said to her. And we laughed in that over-hearty manner that we had fallen into to hide our fears. But I knew in my heart that the road would grow more difficult before very long, and that very likely within a few days we would discover that there was no more road at all, only the steep harsh face of the Wall that we would have to scale in utmost hardship. And she, I think, knew it also.

At Denbail milepost came the business of receiving our gear from our carriers. We stood just beyond the edge of the ceremonial carpet and the defeated candidates who had borne our things this far reached forward—for they were forbidden to set foot on the uncarpeted paving-stones of the upper road—and handed our packs across to us. Mine was being carried by a woman of the Jugglers named Streltsa with whom I had mated once or twice in an earlier year. She stood well back from the carpet's edge and leaned far over to pass it to me, and

as I reached for it she laughed and drew it back, so that I had to strain awkwardly toward her to get it. My bad leg failed me and I began to topple, though I righted myself before I fell. While I was still off balance she caught me with her left hand and pulled me toward her and bit me on the side of the neck, hard enough to draw blood.

"For luck!" she cried. Her eyes were wild. She had dragged herself with gaith.

I spat at her. She had forced me to step back onto the carpet, which was anything but lucky. But Streltsa only laughed again and made a kiss at me in mid-air. I snatched my pack from her and she air-kissed me again. Then she reached down into her bodice and pulled something out and tossed it to me. By reflex I snatched it with a quick grab before it fell.

It was a little carved idol made of white bone: Sandu Sandu the Avenger. His eyes were bright green jewels and he was in full Change, with his penis rising erect out of his thighs like a tiny hatchet. I glared at Streltsa and started to hurl it over the side of the parapet, but then I heard her little cry of shock and fear and I stopped myself before I had thrown it. I saw her trembling. She was gesturing to me: *Take it, keep it.* I nodded, suddenly afraid amidst my anger. Streltsa turned and ran back down the path. Then the anger returned and I would have run after her and flung her down the mountain if I had not been able to gain control of myself in time.

Thissa the Witch had seen the whole thing. She dabbed at the blood on my neck.

"She loves you," Thissa whispered. "She knows she will never see you again."

"She will," I said. "And when I come back, I'll tie her down naked in the plaza and put her through the Changes with her own filthy little idol."

Color rose in Thissa's delicate cheeks. She shook her head in horror and made a quick Witch-sign at me, and took the Avenger from my nerveless hands and tucked him deep into my pack.

"Take care not to lose it," she said. "It will protect us all. There are many evils ahead of us." And she kissed me to calm me, for I was shivering with fury and with fright.

It was not a good way to have begun the journey.

Our bearers now were gone, and only we of the Forty remained. The uncarpeted road here was far rougher than it had been just outside town—the paving-stones had been laid down an immensely long time ago and they were cracked and tilted at crazy angles—and I knew from my climb long ago with Galli that it would get rougher yet, very soon. The packs were crushingly heavy: we carried in them enough food to last for weeks and as much camping equipment as we could manage to haul, aware that there would be no way to obtain any as we climbed. Beyond Denbail, too, the road doubles back into a fold of the Wall and curves around to a side from which the village is no longer visible, which gave us all a powerful sense of having broken the last tie with our home and gone floating off into the empty sky. But it was at Hithati milepost that the real strangeness began.

We reached it in late afternoon and by common

unspoken decision halted to consider the thing that was next to be done.

It was time to choose a leader. We all knew that. They had told us in the training sessions that we were to elect a leader as soon as we were beyond Hithati, because without one we would be a serpent with many heads, each yearning to go in the direction it preferred and no two agreeing.

There was an uneasy moment, just as there had been at the time of the Sacrifice of the Bond, when no one was quite sure of how to go about doing what was necessary to do. I remembered how Muurmut had seized the moment and made himself its master, and I was not going to let him do that again here.

"Well," I said. "My House is the Wall. This is the place of my House. I've waited all my life to reach this place. Stay with me and I'll take you to the Summit."

"Are you nominating yourself, Crookleg?" Muurmut asked, so I knew right away there would be trouble with him.

I nodded.

"Seconded," said Traiben.

"You're of his House," said Muurmut. "You can't second him."

"Seconded, then," said Jaif the Singer.

"Seconded," said Galli, who was of the Vintners, Muurmut's own House.

Everyone was silent a moment.

Then Stapp of Judges said, "If Poilar can nominate himself, so can I." He looked around. "Who seconds me?" Someone snickered. "Who seconds me?" Stapp said again, and his face began to go puffy and hot with anger.

"Why don't you second yourself too, Stapp?" Kath said.

"Why don't you be quiet?"

"Who are you telling to be—"

"You," Stapp said. Kath raised his arm, not necessarily in a menacing way, and an instant later Stapp came jumping forward, ready to fight. Galli caught him by the middle and pulled him back to his place in the circle.

"The Bond," Thissa whispered. "Remember the Bond?" She looked pained by the threat of violence among us.

"Does anyone second Stapp?" I asked.

But no one did. Stapp turned away and stared at the Wall above us. I waited.

Thuiaman of the Metalworkers said, "Muurmut."

"You nominate Muurmut?"

"Yes."

I had expected that. "Seconds?"

Seppil the Carpenter and Talbol the Leathermaker seconded him. I had expected that, too. They were very thick, those three.

"Muurmut is nominated," I said. You will notice how I had already taken charge, here in the time before the choosing. I meant nothing evil by it. It is my way, to lead; someone has to, even when no leader has been appointed. "Are there any other nominations?" There were none. "Then we vote," I said. "Those who are for Poilar, walk to this side. Those who are for Muurmut, over there."

Muurmut gave me a sour look and said, "Shouldn't we set forth our qualifications before the voting, Poilar?"

"I suppose we should. What are yours, Muurmut?"  
"Two straight legs, for one thing."

It was cheap of him, and I would have struck him down then and there except that I knew I could turn this to better advantage by holding my temper. So I simply smiled, not a warm smile. But Seppil the Carpenter guffawed as though he had never heard anyone say anything funnier. Talbot the Leathermaker, who was not the sort to stoop to such stuff, managed a sickly little grunt as his best show of solidarity with Muurmut.

"Yes, very pretty legs," I said, for Muurmut's legs were thick and hairy. "If a leader must think with his legs, then yours are surely superior to mine."

"A leader must climb with his legs."

"Mine have taken me this far," I said. "What else do you have to recommend your candidacy?"

"I know how to command," said Muurmut. "I give orders which others are willing to follow, because they are the correct orders."

"Yes. You say, 'Put the grapes in this tub,' and you say, 'Crush them in such-and-such a fashion,' and you say, 'Now put the juice in the casks and let it turn into wine.' Those are very fine orders, so far as they go. But how do they fit you to command a Pilgrimage? The way you mock my leg, which is as it is through no fault of mine, doesn't indicate much understanding of someone you have sworn in blood to love, does it, Muurmut? And if a leader is deficient in understanding, what kind of leader is he?"

Muurmut was glaring at me as though he would gladly have heaved me from the mountain.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said what I did about the leg. But how will it be for you in the dangerous places, Poilar? When you're climbing, will you also be able to think clearly about the things a leader must think about, when every step you take is hampered by your infirmity?"

"I have no infirmity," I said. "All I have is a crooked leg." I would with great pleasure have kicked him with it, too, but I restrained myself. "Do you have any other qualifications to put forth on behalf of your election, Muurmut?"

"We should hear yours, I think."

Quietly I said, glancing from one to another of my fellow Pilgrims. "The gods have chosen me to bring you to the Summit. You all know that. In a single night every one of you dreamed the dream that I dreamed, in which I was designated. You know that I can lead, and that I can think clearly, and that I am strong enough to climb. Those are my qualifications. Enough of this talk: I call for the vote."

"Seconded," said Jaif.

"Seconded again," said Thissa softly.

And so we voted. Muurmut and Seppil and Talbot stood to one side, and all the others moved across the circle to me, three or four of them very quickly, then another few after a little hesitation, and then, in a general rush, everyone who was left. Even Thuiman, who had nominated Muurmut, deserted him. So it was done. Muurmut made no effort to disguise his fury. I thought for a moment he would attack me in his rage, and I was

ready for him. I would hook my crooked leg behind his good one and throw him to the ground, and seize him by the feet and spin him around and press his face into the stony ground until he submitted to me.

But none of that was necessary. He had better sense than to lift his hand against me in front of the others, and in any case he could see the one-sidedness of the vote. So he came over grudgingly to offer me his hand afterward with the rest. His smile was false and his mien was sullen, though, and I knew that he would let no opportunity pass to displace me, if he could.

"Very well," I said. "I thank you for your support, all of you. And now we must talk of what lies ahead." I looked around. "Who among us has been beyond Hithiat?" I asked.

I heard nervous laughter. We had all come this far during our training, and most of us had gone up the Wall on our own once or twice out of sheer mischief, perhaps as high as Denball, even to Hithiat. But no one goes beyond Hithiat if he has any sense. Still, I thought it was a useful thing to ask, though I expected no reply.

To my surprise Kilarion put up his hand and said, "I have. I've been to Varhad to see the ghosts."

All eyes turned to him. The big man smiled, enjoying the attention his boast had earned him. Then someone laughed again, and others took it up, and Kilarion's face darkened like the sky before a storm. The moment was suddenly very tense.

"Go on," I said. "We're all waiting to hear."

"I went to Varhad. I saw the ghosts and did the Changes with one. Anyone doesn't believe me, he can fight me," Kilarion said, drawing himself up even taller. And he clenched his fists and stared from side to side.

"No one doubts you, Kilarion," I said. "But tell us when it was that all this happened."

"When I was a boy, with my father. Every boy in my clan comes up here with his father when he turns twelve. Axecdan is my clan." He was still glowering. "You think I'm lying, do you? Wait and see what's in store for you up ahead."

"That's what we want you to tell us," I said. "You know and we don't."

"Well," he said, suddenly ill at ease and uncertain of himself. "There are ghosts. And white rocks. And the trees are—well, they're ugly." He paused. He was groping for words. "It's a bad place. Everything moves around. There's a smell in the air."

"What kind of smell?" I asked. "What do you mean, everything moves around?"

"A bad smell. And things—move. I don't know. They just move."

Poor thickbrained Kilarion! I looked over at Traiben and saw him fighting to smother laughter. I shot him an angry glance. Patiently I asked Kilarion again what Varhad was like, and he replied just as fuzzily as before. "A bad place," he muttered. "A very bad place." And that was all we got from him. So whatever he might have learned up there would be of no use to us. The little that he had told us was enough to make us decide to make camp at the level of Hithiat on our first evening,

though, and wait until morning before going on into the unknown reaches of the Wall above us.

Thus it was that I found myself back at that mossy field where Galli and I had enjoyed each other long ago. But there were no Chances played that night, despite all the pent-up desire that had accumulated in us in our half a year in Pilgrim Lodge. Sometimes desire can build to a point where there is no easy way to express it, and that was how it was for all of us that first night. We had been apart so long that it seemed too great a thing to break the abstinence so soon. And so the twenty men camped to one side of the field, and the twenty women on the other. We might just as well have been in our separate halves of Pilgrim Lodge.

I think none of us slept well that night. From higher on the mountain came sharp hooting cries that trailed off into terrible screeches, and sometimes the ground rumbled beneath us as if Kosa Saag meant to hurl us with a single casual shrug into the distant valley. A mist as cold as death slipped down from somewhere and wrapped itself over us as we lay. In the middle of the night I suddenly felt the thirst of the damned take hold of me, and I rose and walked to the little stream that ran through the middle of our moss-patch. When I knelt to drink, I saw my face reflected in the water by moonlight all twisted and distorted, and I saw something else, too, a glitter in the streambed, as of red eyes looking up at me. It seemed to me they were the eyes of Streltsa who had bitten me at Denbail milkpost, and they were weeping blood. Quickly I jumped back and whispered a whole string of prayers to every god I could remember, one after another.

Then I looked across through the mists and I saw the strange woman Hendy up and walking about amidst the sleeping women. For a moment desire stirred in my loins, and I thought how good it would be to go to her and sing the song of mating to her and pull her down in the moss with me. But Hendy was a stranger to me, nor had anyone I knew ever spoken of mating with her either, and this hardly seemed a fit time to approach her for such a thing. I had already been bitten once this day. We stared at each other in the mist, and Hendy's face was like stone. After a time I turned away and went back to my bedroll, and lay face up on it without moving. The mist opened and the stars appeared. I trembled beneath their light and put my hands over my manhood to protect it. Though the stars are gods, not all of them are benevolent ones. They say that the light of some stars does good magic, but the light of other stars is poison, and I had no idea which stars might be above me that night. I longed for morning to come. It was a thousand years in coming.

Above Hithiat lie the ghost-realms, where—so we had been taught—certain Houses of our village had dwelled long ago, until they angered the gods in some fashion and were forced to abandon their homes. During our training our teachers had told us a little of what had happened then, how the part of the mountain where these ancient folk lived had become less and less hospitable

each year and the people who lived there had had to relinquish their settlements little by little as conditions worsened, moving steadily to lower zones until no one dwelled on the mountain at all any longer and our race was entirely confined to life in its lowland valley. But we were not prepared for the deathly look of the place, or the strangeness of it—any of us but Kilarion, and I think even he had forgotten how frightful a place it was.

The road here was broken and dangerous. At least it was a road, though; later on we would have no such luxury. But the paving-stones were split and broken and lifted at angles so that in some areas it would have been better to have none at all, and more than once we crossed a region where swift streams had cut deep gullies away under the path so that the paving-stones were balanced over emptiness and seemed ready to crack beneath our feet and drop us into an abyss. We fastened prongs to ropes and threw them across to the far side to anchor them in the earth, and crossed with care, clinging to the ropes. Some of us were shivering with fright at every step. But the fragile roadway somehow held together.

The air was changing, too. We had expected it to get cooler as we went higher, but in this zone it was oddly hot and moist and dank, more so than on the hottest lowland day. No rain fell, but billowing bursts of wet steam issued noisily from vents in the flank of the mountain. The steam had a sour, sulphurous smell that utterly pervaded the atmosphere, just as Kilarion had warned. Everything was rotten and mildewed here. Pale spores floated in the air. Things grew on things. Dense beads of white mossy fungus coated the whole landscape. We went lurching through it, for there was no avoiding it, and it tangled itself around our legs and hands and made us choke and sneeze. The trees were wrapped in thick sheets of this stuff that trembled in the wind so that the trees themselves seemed to be shaking. They looked like the ghosts of trees. The rocks, too, were fouled with this deathly moss. Their surfaces quivered like live things, or like dead things that could not hold still. I thought I understood now what Kilarion had meant when he said, "Everything moves around."

The Wall itself seemed to be rotting. When you touched it with your fingertip it crumbled, that was how soft the stone was. There were caves everywhere, some of them very deep—dark mysterious holes leading into the heart of the great mountain. We looked into them but of course could see nothing and did not choose to investigate.

There was a constant fall of little pebbles, and sometimes larger things, that had rubbed loose from the higher regions. Now and again we would hear a great rattling and thudding from above and chunks of rock bigger than our heads would come bounding down. Some fell very close indeed to us. The crumbling went on all the time, a steady loss of substance, so that I began to imagine that Kosa Saag must have been ten times as big a million years ago as it was now, and that in another million years it would have crumbled away into something no bigger than a stick.

An hour or so above Hithiat we encountered the first ghosts.



We were no longer walking along a narrow strip on the edge of the mountain but now were on a flat, broad outcropping that was almost like a plateau, though a slight sense of strain told us that we were continuing to climb with every step. Finally we came to Varhad milestone, the last of the series. It was weathered and worn, no more than a splinter of black rock with a few barely legible letters visible on its moss-encrusted surface.

At this level the air was thicker and more moist than ever, and its smell was abominable. In the rocky, foggy meadows on our left-hand side we discovered the ruins of the abandoned settlements. The ancient inhabitants of this region had lived in narrow tapering huts made of long slabs of pink stone set into the ground on an inward lean and covered above with thatching. The thatching had long since rotted away, all but a few bleached strands, and the jagged stone slabs were festooned with shrouds of the white fungus. There were groups of these tottering houses, ten or fifteen in each little group, clustered every few hundred paces apart. They were frightening to behold: decayed, dismal, forlorn. The ruined houses looked like funeral monuments. Truly we had entered a village of the dead.

"This is where the ghosts are," Kilarion told us.

But we saw no ghosts anywhere about, and Kilarion grew red-faced and insistent when Naxa the Scribe and Kath the Advocate jeered at him as a tale-teller. His shape began to flutter as his rage mounted; his face became round and meaty and his neck shrank into his shoulders. The dispute got hotter and hotter until suddenly Kilarion gathered little Kath up under his arm like a bundle of dirty clothes and rushed with him toward the brink of the cliff, as though intending to hurl him over. Kath squallied like a beast being dragged to slaughter. We all shouted in alarm, but none of us was in a position to stop him except Galli. As Kilarion went lurching past her, Galli caught him by his free arm and swung him around with all her considerable strength, so that he lost his grip on Kath and went slamming into one of the ruined huts that stood nearby. He hit it so hard that the cluster of stone slabs fell apart and went toppling over.

Half a dozen strange pallid creatures had been hiding in the hut. They sprang up now, terrified, and began to caper about in wild circles, flapping their arms like birds. I suppose they were hoping to be able to fly away from us. But all they had was arms, not wings.

"Those are the ghosts!" someone screamed. "The ghosts! The ghosts!"

I had never seen such horrid sights. They had the shape of men, but were very long and thin, more like walking skeletons than live people, and they were covered from head to foot with strands of the white fungus that infested this entire zone. It had woven itself into their hair, it ran along their limbs like a garment, bunches of it jutted from their mouths and ears and nostrils. With every movement they made they released clouds of spores, which caused us to back away in fright, fearing that we would breathe them in and be contaminated by the terrible stuff that sprouted from them.

But these folk evidently wanted no more to do with

us than we with them. It took them some few moments to overcome their terror, and then they turned and scampered up into some hillocks beyond their huts, leaving a thinning residue of spores in the air behind them. We covered our faces with our hands, scarcely daring to draw a breath.

"You see?" Kilarion said, after a time, when it seemed safe to put down our hands and move along. "Did I lie to you? This place is full of ghosts. They are the spirits of the old villagers that this white mossy stuff has conjured up."

"And you say you made the Changes with one of them?" Kath asked in a stinging tone. He had recovered now from his fright, and red blotches of anger glowed in his cheeks. "Were you so lustful when you were a boy, Kilarion, that you would do the Changes with something like that?"

"She was only partly a ghost," said Kilarion, looking aggrieved. "She was young and very beautiful, and there was just a little of the white stuff on her."

"A beautiful ghost!" Kath said scathingly, and we all laughed.

Kilarion grew red again. He glared at Kath, and I got myself ready to interfere in case he was having any thoughts of making a second try at throwing Kath over the edge of the cliff. But Tenilda the Musician said something soft to him that soothed him, and he growled and turned aside.

I could see that Kilarion, like Muurmut, might be a problem. He was slow of thought but easy to anger, a bad combination, and enormously strong besides. We would have to handle him with some care.

The ghosts we had frightened were watching us from a distance, peeping out from behind the mossy hillocks. But they ducked down shyly whenever they saw us looking at them. We continued on.

There were other clusters of ruined huts ahead. All of them were tightly wrapped in the shroud-fungus. Everything here was. A more dismal landscape would be hard to imagine: white, silky, bleak. The trees, small and crooked and practically leafless, were almost entirely swathed. Patches of old dead fungus lay everywhere underfoot, forming a sort of whitish crust that crunched as we stepped on it. Even the Wall, which here lay far to our left, had a whitish glint as though the fungus had taken possession of great sections of it also.

Now and again we would see more ghosts flitting about on the hillsides. The elongated wraithlike beings were too timid ever to come near us, but ran back and forth on the slopes, trailing long streamers of their fungus-shrouds behind them.

To Traiben I said, "What are these ghosts, do you think? Pilgrims, are they? Who never went any further up the mountain, but became infested with this white fungus and had to remain down here where it lives?"

He shrugged. "That could be. But I suspect otherwise. What I think is that this region never was abandoned by the ancient settlers, despite the things our teachers told us."

"You mean what we're encountering are the descendants of the very people who built these huts long ago?"

"So I believe, yes. This was probably good farming land once. Then the shroud-stuff came and ruined it. But instead of fleeing, these people stayed. Now the fungus is a part of them. Perhaps it helps to keep them alive. There doesn't seem much to eat in this zone."

With a shudder I said, "And will it become a part of us the same way?"

"Very likely not, or there'd be no Returned Ones. Every Pilgrim who goes up the Wall and comes down again must pass through this district. But they don't bear the infestation." He gave me a somber grin. "Still, I think we would do well to wrap wet cloths over our faces to keep the spores away. And we should make our camp for the night in some happier place."

"Yes," I said. "That seems wise to me too."

We hurried on through this blighted land of ghosts with our heads down and our faces covered.

Ghosts followed us all the way, keeping well back from us. Some of them seemed more bold than the others, dancing up to us and whirling so that their shrouds swept out airily behind them, but we threw rocks at them to prevent them from coming close. After what we had seen and what Traiben had said, we all dreaded the fungus. It was all around us, impossible to avoid. I wondered if I had already taken it into my lungs. Perhaps it was hatching right now in some moist dark cavern of my body, seizing possession of my interior and soon to issue forth from my mouth and my nostrils. The thought sickened me and I went to the side of the road and violently heaved up everything that was in my stomach, praying that I might be heaving up any spores that were within me also.

Kilarion was proven a truth-teller once more before we left the ghost-land; for we even saw a ghost as beautiful as the one he had claimed he had made the Changes with, that time when he came up here with his father when he was a boy.

She appeared on a rocky ledge just above us and stood singing and crooning at us in an eerie, quavering voice. Like all her kind, she was slender and very long-limbed, but just a faint coating of fungus covered her breasts and loins, and none was visible around her face. What little she had on her body gave her a sleek, satiny sheen and made her look soft to the touch, altogether appealing. Her eyes were golden and had a slight slant to them, and her features had a strange purity. A beautiful creature indeed, this ghost. She said something to us in soft, furry tones that we could not understand, and beckoned as if inviting us to come up and dance with her.

I saw Kilarion trembling. The muscles of his huge body bunched and heaved, and cords stood out along his throat. He looked to her and there was a desperate expression in his eyes.

Perhaps this was the very ghost he had embraced here long ago. No doubt she still had some magic over his soul even now.

I kicked sharply at his leg to get his attention and pointed up ahead when he gave me an angry glance.

"Keep moving, Kilarion," I said.

"Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life living in this place?"

He muttered something under his breath. But he understood what I was saying, and walked on, eyes averted.

After a time I looked back. The ghost-witch, for surely a witch of some kind was what she was, was still beckoning sinuously to us. But now, with the light coming from behind her, I was able to see the faint pale cloud of spores rising about her lovely head. She went on gesturing to us until we could no longer see her.

We marched grimly through that land of hot dank mists and quivering fungus shrouds and evil sulphurous stinks for hour after hour as the day waned. There seemed to be no end to it. But at last, toward nightfall, we emerged into a region where the air was clear and sweet and the rocks were free of fungus and the trees once more had leaves, and we gave thanks to Kreshe the Savior for our escape.

Now we were above the highest milestone whose name anyone still knew, entering territory that was completely unknown to any of us.

There was a sort of path here, but it was narrow and vague and erratic, and it seemed best, in the gathering darkness, not to try to go on this late in the day. So we made camp for our second night on the Wall. My mind was full of thoughts of the land of ghosts, of its sinister spores, its beckoning witches.

But then I put such thoughts aside. One does not get up the Wall by thinking of what is behind one, any more than by fretting about what lies ahead. You must live in the moment as you climb, or you will fail utterly.

We had camped in a kind of little earthen pocket in a sheer, steep gorge right on the lip of the Wall, which Kilarion had found by scrambling on ahead of the rest of us. The bare rock face of Kosa Saag rose almost vertically in a series of sharp parapets just in back of us, disappearing into the dimness overhead. We saw hairy gnomish faces peering down from us out of those parapets, bright-eyed rock-apes of some sort, who jeered at us and tossed handfuls of pebbles at us. We ignored them.

On the other side of us lay a vastness of open air, with the lights of some distant village, not our own, sparkling like glitterflies far out in the black valley below. A little stony rim no higher than our knees provided a kind of natural barrier just at the edge of our campsite; beyond it was a straight drop into a pit of immeasurable darkness. There was a swift stream running across the corner of the gorge. A few strange trees grew beside it. They had spiral trunks, twisted like a screw, and stiff, angular upturned leaves; and from their boughs dangled a great many heavy fruits, a reddish blue in color. They were long and full like breasts that held milk, and were marked even by small protrusions like nipples at their lower ends. Little tufts of grass grew there also, purplish, with a knifeblade sharpness to it; otherwise the gorge was barren.

Thuiman, Kilarion, and Galli found some bits of dry wood along the canyon wall and built a sputtering fire.

The rest of us unpacked our bedrolls and laid out our places for the night. We were all famished, for no one had wanted to pause for a midday meal in the land of ghosts. So we brought out cheese and dried meat, and some jugs of wine. I saw Marsiel of the House of Growers eyeing the breast-fruits on a tree overhanging our campsite with some interest and called out to her, "What do you think? Are they safe to eat?"

"Who knows? I've never seen anything like them."

She pulled one off, hefted it, squeezed it, finally slit its glossy skin with the nail of her forefinger. A reddish juice oozed from the break. She shrugged. Tossing it from one hand to the other, she looked around at the rest of us.

"Does anybody here want to taste it?"

We all stared, not knowing what to do.

They had warned us in our training that we would be able to carry with us only enough food to last us for the first few weeks of the climb, and then after that we would have to live on whatever we might find. And the things we found were not likely to be familiar to us. Well, we were resigned to the necessity of eating unknown things sooner or later. But how could we tell what was edible and what was poisonous?

Traiben said, "Give it here, Marsiel. I'll try a bite."

"No," I said at once. "Wait. Don't do it, Traiben."

"Somebody has to," he said. "Do you want to?"

"Well . . ."

"Then I will."

"Are you afraid, Poilar?" Muurmut called. "Why? What are you afraid of? It's only a piece of fruit!" And he laughed. But I noticed that he made no offer to take it from Traiben and try it himself.

It was a dilemma. Of course I had no wish to see my closest friend eat poison and fall down dead before my eyes. But I was afraid to bite into the fruit myself. So were we all; we wanted to live. That was only normal caution. But Traiben was right: *someone* had to taste it. If I was unwilling to do it, then he would. There is a line between caution and downright fear, and I had crossed it just then. I could not remember ever having been so cowardly in anything before.

Sick with shame, I watched as Traiben pulled the fruit apart where Marsiel had broken its skin. He scooped out a small mound of orange pulp and swallowed it without hesitation.

"Sweet," he said. "Good. Very good."

He took a second mouthful, and a third, and nodded to show his pleasure.

"Let me have some," Kilarion said.

"And me," said Thuiman.

"No, wait, all of you!" I shouted. "How can you know so soon that the fruit is safe? Suppose it has a poison in it that takes an hour to act, or two? We have to see what happens to Traiben. If he's still well in the morning, then we can all have some."

There was some grumbling. But generally everyone agreed that what I had said was wise.

I went over to Traiben afterward and said quietly, "That was crazy, what you did. What if you had curled up and died right on the spot?"

"Then I'd be dead. But I'm not, am I? And now we can be pretty sure that that fruit is good to eat. Which will be useful to know if we encounter a lot of it higher up."

"But you could have *died*," I said.

He gave me one of his patient all-enduring looks, as though I were some cranky child who needed to be seen through an attack of the colic.

"And if Chaliza had tasted the fruit in my place and she had died, or Thissa, or Jaif? Would that have been any better?"

"For you it would."

"For me, yes. But we are a group, Poilar. We are a Forty. And we all have to take turns tasting strange things when we find them, whatever the risks, or we'll surely starve in the upper reaches of the Wall. Do you understand why I did what I did? I have had my turn, now. I've done my duty and I think that I'll survive it, and perhaps it'll be a long while before I need to risk myself again, for which I'm profoundly glad. But if I had refused the risk, how could I have expected others to take it for me? We need to think of the survival of the Forty, Poilar, and not only our own."

I felt doubly shamed now.

"How stupid of me not to see it," I said. "We are all one. We owe our lives each to the other."

"Yes."

"I wish now I had taken the fruit from you."

He grinned. "I don't. You still have your turn as taster ahead of you. I've survived mine."

He seemed smug about that. Which made me angry, after all my concern for him. But he had risked himself to taste the fruit and I had not. He has a right to his smugness, I told myself.

It was night now. A chill came into the air and we thickened our skins against it, and sat huddling close together around the dying fire until there was nothing left but embers. One by one we began to go off to our bedrolls.

"Is that a Wall-hawk?" Tenilda asked suddenly.

We were standing near the rim of the gorge just then. She pointed into the abyss. I followed the line of her arm and saw a creature hovering out there in mid-air, a good-sized bird of some sort. It moved closer as I looked, coming so near that I could almost reach out and touch it. It seemed to be studying us.

The bird was a repellent-looking thing with a round shaggy body about the size of a child's, from which two powerful sets of golden talons jutted. Its bright yellow beak had the shape of a hooked knife, and its eyes were red and huge. Curving wings of skin, longer than a man's arms, held it aloft, beating fiercely. I saw claw-tipped spikes like little bony fingers protruding from their outer edges. I smelled the musky, acrid odor of its thick black fur and I could feel the cool wind coming from its wings. It did not dart about, but held itself in the same place in the air; save for those strenuous wingbeats it was utterly motionless, so that one might almost think it was dangling from a cord that descended from the sky.

I had seen Wall-hawks now and then swooping high

over the valley, but never one at such close range. I had no doubt, though, that a Wall-hawk was what this ugly creature was. It did not seem big enough to be able to carry off a grown man, as the village fables said; but it looked dangerous all the same, devilish, malevolent. I stood as if frozen, staring at it in weird fascination. And it stared back with evident curiosity. Perhaps it had only come on a scouting mission, not to attack.

"Step aside, Poilar," said a voice behind me.

It was Kilarion. He had picked up a rock the size of his head and was making ready to throw it at the hovering bird. I heard him humming the death-song.

"No," I said. "Don't!"

He ignored me. Shouldering past me to the rim, he swung himself about in a half-circle, pivoting off his left knee, and hurled the rock upward and outward with all his tremendous strength. I would not have believed it was possible to throw so big a rock so far and so hard. It rose on a short arc and caught the Wall-hawk in its belly with a sharp thud. The bird let out a piercing shriek loud enough to have been heard down in the village and fell from sight, plummeting as if dead, a sudden swift descent; but as I leaned over the rim and peered down I thought I saw it make a recovery in the darkness below and go flapping out into the night. I was uncertain of that; but it seemed to me I heard its far-off angry screeching.

"Killed it!" Kilarion said, proudly preening himself and doing a little dance of self-congratulation.

"I'm not so sure," I said gloomily. "It'll be back. With others of its kind. You should have left it alone."

"It's an evil bird. A filthy, loathsome bird."

"Even so," I said. "There was no need for that. Who knows what trouble it will bring?"

Kilarion said something mocking and walked away, very pleased with himself. But I remained uneasy over what he had done, and I called aside Jaif and Galli and Kath and one or two others and suggested that we stand guard through the night, two of us at a time until morning came. It was a good idea. Galli and Kath stood first watch and I lay down to sleep, telling them to call me when my time of duty had come; but hardly had I closed my eyes, or so it seemed, but I felt Galli roughly tugging me awake, and I looked up to see the night astrir with fiery red eyes wheeling above us like demons.

There were five or six hawks overhead, perhaps—or ten, or twenty, more likely; who had time to count? The air was thick with them. I saw their eyes; I felt their beating wings; I saw their ravening beaks and talons. We were all up and defending ourselves with cudgels and stones now as they swept and swirled among us. Kilarion carried one bird on each shoulder—they had singled him out, it seemed, as the one who had thrown the rock—and they clawed at him, flapping furiously, while he struggled to seize them by their ankles and pull them free of him. I went to his aid, cudgeling a hawk loose. It flew straight up when I hit it, squawking madly and swinging about to come at me, but I held it off with wild swings of my stick. Kilarion meanwhile had ripped the other bird free of his flesh: I saw him smash it to the ground and bring his heel down on its chest. From far

away on the other side of the stream I heard one of our women screaming. And I saw, by glinting moonlight, Traiben with a pile of stones stacked in front of him, snatching them up one by one and calmly hurling them with great accuracy toward any hawk that came near him. I had a glimpse of Hendy standing by herself, her head thrown back and her eyes gleaming strangely as she slowly swung a cudgel from side to side in a wide arc about her, though there were no hawks in her vicinity. Kath, meanwhile, had rekindled our fire, and was handing blazing torches out to several of us, who thrust them upward at the attackers.

Then it ended, as suddenly as it had begun. One of the hawks gave the command to retreat—it was unmistakable, a clear harsh honking cry that reverberated off the side of the Wall like the sound of a gallimond played in its highest register—and all of them took off at once in a great clatter of bare thrashing wings, screaming to the stars as they went. One snatched up a chain of sausages that we had left unfinished by the fireside at suppertime, and flew away with it. We saw the whole host of them for a moment outlined against the moonlit sky, and then they were gone, all but the one Kilarion had trampled, which lay dead near Marsiel's bedroll. She kicked it aside with a little cry of disgust, and Thuiaman scooped it up on the end of a stick and tossed it over the rim of the gorge.

"Is anyone hurt?" I asked.

Nearly all of us were, to some degree or other. Fesild of the Vintners was the worst. She had taken a long cut across her cheek that ran close to her eye, and another, very deep, on her left shoulder. Her face was all blood and her left arm was jerking as though it wanted to leap free of her body. Kreod, one of the three Healers among us, went to deal with her. Kilarion had been badly cut too, but he laughed his wounds off. Talbol had a slash the length of his arm, Gazin the Juggler a bright red set of crossmarks on his back, Grycindil a torn hand, and so on. The binding of wounds went on almost until morning. I myself had been bruised more than a little by wings but I had shed no blood.

Traiben counted us, and reported after a time that we were all accounted for. None of us had been carried off by the hawks: our only loss in that regard had been the chain of sausages. So the tales of how Wall-hawks would snatch unwary Pilgrims from the trail and devour them in their cyries were only fanciful myths, as I had always suspected. The hawks were simply not big enough to do such a thing. But they were troublesome birds all the same, and I knew we would have more grief from them higher up.

As the red light of rising Marilemma came into the sky, Kilarion squatted down beside me where I sat kneading my bruises and said in a quiet voice quite different from his usual one, "It was stupid of me to throw that rock, wasn't it, Poilar?"

"Yes. It was. I remember telling you something of that sort when you did it."

"But I saw the hawk hanging in the air and I hated it. I wanted to kill it, because it was so ugly."

"If you want to kill every ugly thing you see, Kilarion, it's a wonder you've allowed yourself to live so long. Or have you never seen yourself in a mirror?"

"Don't mock me," he said. His voice was still soft. "I told you, I think it was a stupid thing to do. I should have listened to you."

"Yes. You should."

"You always seem to be able to see what will happen before it happens. You knew that if I hit the hawk with the rock, it would come back with others of its kind and attack us."

"I suspected it might, yes."

"And earlier you made me keep moving, when I might have stopped and done the Changes with that ghost. You were right that time too: the ghost would have taken me. I would have become a ghost myself, if I had gone with her. But I was too stupid to see that for myself." He was staring bleakly at the ground, pushing pebbles around with his finger. I had never seen him so dejected. This was a different Kilarion: reflective, brooding.

I smiled and said, "Don't be so hard on yourself, Kilarion. Just try to think things through a little before you act, all right? You keep out of a lot of trouble if you get into the habit of doing that."

But still he stared down and pushed pebbles. Sadly he said, "You know, when we were picked, I was sure that I would be the leader of our Forty. I'm the strongest. I have great endurance and I know how to build things. But I'm not clever enough to lead, am I? The leadership has to go to someone like you. Traiben's even cleverer than you—he's cleverer than anyone—but he's not a leader. Neither is Muurmut, though he thinks he is. But you are, Poilar. From now on I'll follow whatever you tell me to do. And if you see me about to do something dumb, just say very quietly in my ear, *Wall-hawks, Kilarion*. Or *ghosts*. To remind me. Will you do that for me, Poilar?"

"If that's what you want, of course."

He looked up at me. His eyes seemed almost worshipping. It was embarrassing. I grinned and slapped him on the thigh and told him what an asset he was to us all. But secretly I was relieved. A stupid man who admits that he's stupid is far less of a danger to his comrades than one who doesn't. Perhaps Kilarion would be less of a problem than I had feared a little earlier. At the very least I would hold some ascendance over him for a while, until his stupidity came bursting through once again.

We washed ourselves in the cold little stream and had a morning meal of cold puffbread and moonmilk. It was necessary to help some of those who had been worst injured by the hawks. Since Traiben had not died during the night, nor so much as complained of feeling unwell, we ate some of the breast-fruits too—they were cool and sweet and tender—and stowed as many of them as we thought we could carry in our packs. Then we made ready to leave the gorge.

Getting out was harder than going in had been: the little ravine turned very narrow at its upper end and after another hundred paces unexpectedly terminated in a

naked shield of rock that rose absolutely vertically as far as we could see. Kilarion, who had not gone all the way to this point when he had found the gorge for us the night before, was livid with chagrin. It was plain to him now that there was no road up; and he hopped about, stamping the ground and spitting in fury, like one who has been stung by a swarm of palibozos. "Wait," he said. "You all wait here." And off he ran back toward the entrance to our gorge, dropping his pack as he went.

We saw him minutes later, looking down and beckoning from one of the narrow parapets from which the rock-apes had jeered at us at twilight. He had found a path. We swung about and went the way he had gone, and he met us at the trailhead, which was an uninviting tumble of boulders that looked as though it led downward, not up. What impulse had led him to try it? It could not have been less promising. But it was the right way to go; and Kilarion glowed with satisfaction as he showed us how to circle a jagged little chimney-formation that marked the real start of the trail. He looked to me for approval, as if to say, See? See? I'm good for something after all! I nodded to him. He had his merit, yes.

The rock-apes reappeared in mid-morning, scampering along a row of finely eroded pink parapets not far above our line of march. They would hold to some needle-like outcropping of rock with one hand and swing far out to chatter derisively at us or pelt us with stones, or even their own bright yellow dung. One such missile struck Kilarion on his shoulder, which was already sore from the talons of the Wall-hawks. He made an angry rumbling sound and snatched up a jagged rock, and made as if to hurl it at his assailant. Then he must have thought better of it; for he paused in mid-throw, and glanced toward me with a foolish grin, as though asking me for permission.

I smiled and nodded and he threw, but the stone missed. The ape laughed wildly and showered him with bits of gravel. Kilarion hissed and cursed and threw another rock, as ineffectually as before. After a time the apes lost interest in us and we saw no more of them that morning.

There was nothing like a road any more, or any sort of regular path. We had to find our own trail as we climbed. Sometimes we had to haul ourselves up over rugged cliffs that were like staircases for giants, made up of blocks of stone twice the height of a man which had to be managed with rope and grappling hooks. Sometimes we moved across a sharp rubble of broken rock where an entire ledge had collapsed into talus. I saw Traiben gasping and struggling as we made our way up this treacherous rocky fan, and once he fell, and I paused beside him and held him up until he had caught his breath, and walked with my arm around his shoulders until he was able to go on again by himself.

But for the most part the mountain at this elevation was easier to ascend than we had expected, since what had looked from below like a vertical wall of stone turned out in fact to be a series of broad rocky slabs, each sloping upward, to be sure, but not as steeply as

we had thought from a distance. In aggregate the angle was a sharp one; taken one by one each slab could be crossed by mere steady plodding.

Not that I want you to think that any of it was easy. Where there was a track we could follow without using ropes, it was of crumbled rock, soft and gravelly the way much of Kosa Saag's surface is, so that we constantly slipped and slid and risked twisted ankles. We labored under heavy packs and the sun was very strong. The hot blaze of white Ekmelios dazzled our eyes and burned our faces and necks and turned the rock slabs we were crossing into blinding mirrors. We baked in the heat, instead of stewing and simmering in it as one does when one lives in the lowlands. We were used to that other kind of heat, close as a damp blanket about us all the time, and we missed it sorely. There was no warm thick haze up here to screen us from the fury of the white sun, no gentle moist mists. The sultry humid world of our village was very far away now.

Not only was the air much more clear at this level, it seemed less nourishing, too: dry, thin, piercing, disagreeable stuff. We had to breathe twice as deeply as we were accustomed to in order to fill our chests, which made our heads ache and our throats and nostrils feel chafed and raw. Our bodies made adjustments to the thinner air as we climbed: I could feel little alterations going on within me, changing passages expanding, lungs belling out, blood traveling more swiftly in my vessels. After a time I knew that I was adapting successfully, or successfully enough, at least, to this new environment. But I had never realized before what a rich, intoxicating substance our lowland air was. It was like strong wine, compared with this harsh mountain air.

On the other hand, the water in this high country was far purer and more pleasing than village water. It had a magical clarity and sparkle, and it was always cold and fresh. But there was very little of it. Streams and springs were few and far between on these slopes. Whenever we found one we dropped our packs and knelt and drank greedily, and then we would fill our storage jars, for who knew how long it would be before the next fresh water?

We were cut off now from all view of our home territory. Below us everything was buried under thick white fog. It was as if a great swath of white fur lay upon our familiar valley. Now and again it would break a little, giving us a glimpse of greenness, but there was nothing there that we could recognize. So there was no longer any down for us, only up, up, up, up.

Kosa Saag was our entire world: our universe. We had begun to discover that the great mountain that we called the Wall was actually not one mountain but many, a sea of mountains, each one rising on the backs of those around it the way high waves rise in the midst of stormy waters. We had no idea where the summit was. Sometimes it seemed that we had already attained the highest peak, for we saw clear sky above it, but we were always wrong, because when we got to the top of that one we would find that there were new summits rising beyond it. One peak led to another, and another, and another. When we looked up we saw only an infinite perplexing

complexity of pink rock: spires, parapets, shields, gorges. It seemed to go on all the way to Heaven. There was no summit. There was only the endless mountain above us, forever sloping away out of sight above us while we crossed its interminable lower reaches like a file of patient ants.

From the start of our climb we had been ascending the outer rim of the Wall, making our way through the gullies and pathways and outcroppings that jutted from its great face. So it was easy for me to choose each day's route: it stretched before us like a narrow continuing highway winding along the face of the Wall, and there was no question about the best way to go, for there was only one. But we were unable now to proceed any further in that fashion, because we had arrived at a place where an impassable overhanging barrier of unscalable rock rose straight up in front of us to a height that was beyond the limit of our vision. We studied it a long while and there was not one of us who saw any way that we could master it. No route seemed to lead around to the side of it, and to climb it was unthinkable.

So we followed the only route that was possible to take, which sent us turning eastward, into an interior valley of Kosa Saag. There we camped for a little while in a sort of forest, cool and shadowy, on this inner arm of the Wall. I say "a sort of forest" because the plants that grew in that place, though they were as tall as trees, were not anything at all like any tree of the lowland we had ever seen. They had no woody structure, but were more like giant blades of grass, or, rather, like bunches of grass stuck together, for each trunk seemed to be made up of a dozen or more thin, narrow shafts sprouting from a single base. Sticking out all along their sharp-angled sides, in place of leaves, were scores of wedge-shaped shoots that looked like hatchetheads.

When you touched one of these trees, it made your hand tingle. If you held on very long after the tingling started, your skin began to burn.

There were small green birds of an unfamiliar kind in these trees, perching by twos and threes on the edges of the hatchetheads. Their bodies were round and plump, with tiny comical scarlet legs barely visible beneath their bellies, and their wings were short and so weak that it was all they could do to flutter from one hatchethead to another. It would be hard to conceive of birds that were more unlike the terrible Wall-hawks. And yet these downy little birds were not to be taken so lightly, for their eyes were very fierce, strange white orbs that burned like miniature suns in their forehead. There was hatred in those eyes, and menace. Indeed, when Gazin the Juggler stood beneath one of those trees and called out laughingly to the birds above him, because their roundness and fatness amused him so, they responded with a downpouring of sticky spittle that brought howls of pain from him, and sent him rushing across the forest floor to plunge into the stream that ran through its middle.

The water of that stream was red as blood, very curious to behold. I feared for Gazin. But he sprang up out of it unharmed by that strange-colored water, rubbing at



his arms and chest where the bird-spittle had struck him. There were welts and blisters all over him. We kept away from those trees thereafter.

Because I felt uneasy in this alien place, I asked Thissa of the Witch House to cast a spell for our safety before we settled in for the night. Camping on the Wall's edge, we had spent our nights in narrow, secluded places, easily defended; in this relatively flat terrain we were at the mercy of any wandering denizen of the Wall's interior districts.

She said, "I want something of Gazin's, for he was the first one injured here."

Gazin gave her one of his juggling-balls. Thissa drew something magical on it with the tip of her finger and buried it in a soft place in the ground beside the stream, and lay down to press her cheek against it. Then, still lying that way, she recited the spell for the safety of travelers. That is a long and very costly spell, which draws much energy from the Witch who utters it, because it is earth-magic and she must send some piece of her soul into the soul of the spirit of the place where it is recited. As she spoke I saw her amber eyes lose their brightness and her slender body go slack with fatigue. But she gave unstintingly of herself to ensure our safety here.

I knew the spell would be a good one. I had had faith in Thissa's powers ever since a dark time in the third year of my training as a candidate, when I had begun to fear I would not be chosen for the Pilgrimage and had gone to Thissa in her chamseller's shop to ask her to cast a spell for my success. Surely the charm that she gave me then must have played a powerful role in my being selected. It was comforting to know that we had a Witch of her capability among us.

We pitched our bedrolls in an open place, far from the hatchhead trees and their unpleasant little birds. Stum and Narril were posted as the first guards in case Wall-hawks or rock-apes or other troublemakers should arrive in the night, and I appointed Min the Scribe and Aminteer the Weaver as the second shift on watch.

The stars were unusually bright in the clear cool air that prevailed here, and had a hard sheen. Someone began calling off their names: there is Ysod, that one is Selinune, that is Myaul. From Naxa the Scribe came a chilly little laugh. "Stars of ill omen," he said. "Ysod is the star that crushes other stars and devours them. Myaul ate her own worlds. The light of Selinune is light that screams."

"Save your wisdom for some other time, Naxa," came a woman's voice, perhaps Fesild's or Grycindi's. "Don't frighten us with your tales while we're trying to fall asleep."

"And there is Hyle among them," continued Naxa, unperturbed. It was in Naxa's nature never to let up, when there was knowledge he wanted to share with you.

Scribes are worse even than Scholars when it comes to giving lectures; for everyone understands that the Scholar is learned, but the Scribe, who has picked up his knowledge while copying the texts of Scholars, is eager to impress you with what he has absorbed. "Hyle is the worst demon-star of them all," Naxa said. "Why, I could tell you stories of Hyle—"

"Good night, Naxa."

"The gods were walking among the stars," Naxa said, "and they came to Hyle, and Kreshe put out his hand—"

"I'll put out my hand and break your head," a new voice said. Kilarion's, it was. "Shut up and let us sleep, will you?"

This time Naxa relented. There was no more talk of demon-stars out of him that night.

I drifted off to sleep soon afterward. But in a little while I felt someone getting in beside me.

"Hold me, Poilar. I'm freezing. I can't stop shivering."

It was Thissa. The traveler-spell had drained her more deeply perhaps than she had expected, and her entire body was trembling. I took her in my arms and almost at once, because I had gone so long without a mating, I began to slip into the Changes. It happened without my willing it, without my even wanting it. I felt the familiar stirring at the base of my belly, the shifting of the flesh as my maleness emerged from its dormancy.

Thissa felt it too. Softly she said, "Please, not now—I'm so tired, Poilar."

I understood. She had not come to me for Changes. I forced myself back toward the neuter state, but it was difficult for me. My control kept breaking; my body slid again and again toward readiness. But I could tell that Thissa was in the state without breasts just now and I knew that if I touched her between the thighs I would find no aperture waiting for me. She was utterly neuter and intended to stay that way. I had no choice but to respect that. I struggled for control, and attained it, finally. We lay together calmly. Her head was against my chest, her legs were entwined with mine. She sobbed from weariness, but it was a soft, easy sobbing.

She said, after a time, "Someone here will die tomorrow."

"What? Are you sure?"

"I saw it in the fire."

I was silent a moment. "Do you know who it will be?"

"No. Of course not."

"Or how?"

"No," she said. "The fire was too low, and I was too weary to conjure it up again."

"We've only begun our climb. It's too soon for deaths."

"Death comes whenever it pleases. This will be only the first of many."

I was silent again for a long time. Then I said, "Will it be me, do you think?"

"No. Not you."

"You're sure of that, are you?"

"There's too much life in you, Poilar."

"Ah."

"But it will be one of the men."

"Jaif? Dom? Talbol?"

She put her hand over my lips. "I told you, I wasn't able to see. Not clearly. One of the men. Let's sleep now, Poilar. Just hold me. Hold me. I'm so cold."

I held her. After a time I felt the tension leave her body as she drifted off into sleep. But I remained wide awake myself, thinking of the death that was marching toward us even at this moment. Perhaps the gods had

chosen Muumut: I would shed no tears for him. But what if it was Traiben, despite all his hunger to see things and understand them? I would not be able to bear the death of Traiben. Then I thought of this one, and that one, and still another. I lay like that for hours, or so it seemed. Overhead the stars grew even brighter and harder. I feared them: poison-stars, demon-stars, death-stars. Ysod, Myaul, Selinune, Hyle. I felt myself shriveling beneath their furious light.

Then Thissa was awake again.

"Go ahead," she said, in a soft voice different from the one she had used before. "You can if you want to."

She had become fully female. Her slim body, which had been nothing but cool smooth skin and fragile bones, was fuller, more womanly now. I felt soft round breasts against my chest. My hand slipped downward and there was an aperture, and it was throbbing.

Why this act of kindness? Thissa was altogether exhausted, and I knew from years gone by that she was not fond of mating even at the best of times. Had she lied to me, and was I the one who would die tomorrow, and this her way of sending me off to my death with a warm tender memory fresh in my mind? That was a somber thought, almost somber enough to discourage me from the mating. Almost. But my desires were stronger than my fear. She opened to me and our bodies joined; and though I could feel that disconcerting strangeness which her body emanated, as I had on earlier occasions when we had been lovers—an odd troubling tingling sensation which came from her in moments like this, somewhat like the throbbing sensation which certain strange fishes give off when you graze against them in the river—she brought me quickly to pleasure, quickly, quickly.

Afterward she said, "You are not the one who will die, Poirar. I'm certain of that."

Had she read my mind?

No, not even the House of Witches can do that, I told myself. Except for those Witches who are also santhanillas, and santhanillas are very few and far between.

I lay awake a little while longer, staring up at Hyle and Selinune. Then one of the moons—I think it was Tibios—came into the sky and its brightness dulled the terrible glare of the stars, for which I was grateful. I closed my eyes and fell into a troubled sleep, and then, I suppose, into a much deeper one: when I awoke we were long into morning and everyone else was up and about. Thissa smiled shyly at me from the other side of the stream. I realized they had not wanted to wake me; and I felt more and more certain that I was the one who had been singled out for death this day, and that all of them knew it, and that was why I had been allowed to sleep. But of course that was not so.

The death—our first death on Kosa Saag—came with great suddenness when it came. That was about mid-morning, when we were well up above our campsite of the night before, crossing a narrow plateau that was bordered on one side by what looked like a lake of pitch and on the other by a steep shoulder of the Wall. The

day was very warm. Ekmelios blazed right into our faces and there was no hiding from him. In places the ground was cracked open and narrow little columns of yellow and green light, something like marshlight, were rising from it. The air in these places had a dark, oily smell. Some of these small lights had broken free of the ground and were wandering about by themselves, easy as ghosts. We kept well away from them.

As we passed through a grove of small waxy-looking trees with thick crowns of glossy white leaves, a band of rock-apes abruptly appeared as if they had risen straight out of the earth, screaming and chattering, and started tormenting us with pebbles, rocks, gobbets of mud, anything that their gnarled little hands could lift and throw.

These apes of the Wall were like cruel caricatures of men, miniature figures no more than knee-high to us, and gnarled and hairy and hideous. Their arms and legs were short and crooked, their noses were flat and huge, their eyes were immense, their feet turned outward and upward like huge hands. Yellow fangs jutted from their mouths. Reddish fur covered their squat little bodies and they had great tufts of it, like beards, around their necks. No wonder they hated us and bedeviled us so: for we were what they would have wanted to be, if the gods had not chosen to make them ugly.

At a distance they were nothing more than nuisances. But here, no more than twenty or thirty paces from us, they were dangerous. Their missiles fell upon us in thick clouds. There was not one of us who was not hit and bruised. The safety-spell that Thissa had cast for us in the forest had no power out here. We shouted at them in our fiercest way, and Narril and Thuiman pulled ropes from their packs and began to crack them like whips to frighten them off. That worked for a time; but then the apes saw how little harm the ropes could do and they returned, noisier and more bothersome than ever.

A great soft clod of greasy mud caught Stapp of the House of Judges in the face. It stunned him for a moment: I saw him coughing and gagging as he peeled it away from his eyes and lips and nostrils. Hardly was he able to breathe again but they hit him with a second one, even softer and looser, which splattered all over his face and chest.

That seemed to drive him berserk. Stapp was ever a man of quick temper. I saw him snorting and spitting mud. Then he yelled wildly and pulled out his cudgel and rushed madly forward, laying about him to right and left. Taken aback by his frantic onslaught, the rock-apes retreated a little way. Stapp pursued them, swinging his cudgel with lunatic zeal, as they edged back toward the pitchy lake. I called to him to come back, that he was moving too far away from us, but there was never any getting Stapp to listen to reason when his anger was upon him.

Then Kilarion started to run toward him. I thought at first that he too wanted to join the fray, that in his simple fashion he envied Stapp his fun; but no, this time Kilarion meant only to rescue him from his own folly. I heard him calling out to Stapp, "Get back, get back, the beasts will kill you." Kilarion ripped one of the little waxy-

looking trees from the ground as he ran and swung it like a broom, sweeping the apes out of his path as though they were bits of trash. One after another they went soaring through the air as they were struck, and dropped in dazed heaps many paces away.

But for Stapp Kilarion's help came too late. One moment he stood by the edge of the lake, cudgeling apes in wild fury; and in the next, an ape had leaped upon his shoulders from the side and drawn its sharp talons across Stapp's throat, so that a gout of dark blood came leaping out; and another moment more and he was falling backward, backward, twisting as he fell. He landed face downward on the black pitchy surface of the lake and sank slowly into it while his blood bubbled up about him.

"Stapp!" Kilarion screamed, kicking apes aside so fiercely that one of them perished with every kick. He held the little tree that he carried out toward the fallen Stapp. "Grab the tree, Stapp! Grab it!"

Stapp did not move. His life's blood had gone surging out of him in no more than an instant or two and he lay dead in the thick tar. Kilarion, at the lake's border, slowly pounded the crown of the tree against the ground in dull rage and bellowed in anger and frustration.

It wasn't easy to take Stapp from the lake. The pitch held him in a gluey grasp, and we did not dare set foot in it, so we had to pull him out with grappling hooks. Malti the Healer and Min the Scribe put together some words out of their memories to say for him, drawing the text from the Book of Death, and Jaif sang the dirge while Tenilda played the dirge-tune on her pipe. As for the special words that one must say when a member of the House of Judges dies, we couldn't remember them well, for there were no other Judges among us, but we did our best to say something. Then we buried him under a high cairn of boulders and moved on.

"Well," Kath said, "he was too hot-headed to have been a good Judge anyway."

When I looked back, several of the little yellow and green marsh-lights were dancing atop Stapp's cairn.

Now we moved outward toward the front edge of the Wall again, for on that side there was a kind of natural ramp which promised to take us upward, whereas inland the mountain's core rose in a single gleaming breathtaking thrust that struck our hearts with terror. For many days we wound our way along this outer ramp. It rose steeply but not unmanageably in some places, held level in others, and in some actually began to descend, giving us the disheartening thought that all we had accomplished in these days of struggle had been to discover a path leading down the far side of Kosa Saag that would take us to some unfriendly village of that unknown territory. But then we began to climb again, still keeping to the outer face of the Wall.

Strange winged creatures rode the air currents high up in the great abyss that lay just beside our line of march. Not Wall-hawks, no: these had feathered wings. They seemed to be of colossal size, bigger than Wall-hawks: as big as roundhouses, for all we could tell. But we

weren't sure. They were too far above us to judge. In the open space above us there was no way to establish scale. We saw them outlined against the brightness of the sky as they sailed on the lofty winds. Abruptly one would plummet like a falling stone, catching itself in mid-fall, rising again as if scanning for prey, finally darting inward to pick some hapless creature off the face of the Wall in one of the zones of the upper levels. It was a frightening thing to see, though they never came down as far as the level where we were marching now. Would we encounter them higher up? Would they swoop on us as they we saw them swooping on other prey now? That was a dismaying thought, that there would be no safe harbor up there. We might do better to turn again and head toward the interior of the Wall, I thought, toward some sheltered plateau where those deadly birds would not venture. But we had to go where it was possible to go, and for the time being the interior folds and gorges of the Wall were inaccessible to us and we were compelled to follow these outer trails.

As we ascended I could see more and more of the World. It was far bigger than I had ever imagined, rolling outward to the horizon for league upon league beyond all counting. Wherever there was a break in the white clouds below I was able to make out a host of rivers and hills and meadows, and more rivers and hills and meadows beyond those, and long green stretches of forest with dark smudges within them that I supposed were villages, so far away that very likely no one from any of the villages that cluster at the base of the Wall has ever been to them. Perhaps I was looking at the city where the King lives, for all I knew. I tried to imagine him in his palace, writing decrees that would go forth to provinces that were so far away that the new decrees would be obsolete and meaningless by the time that word reached them that such-and-such a law had gone into effect.

At the very edge of the World I saw the sharp gray line of the horizon where the sky came down and touched the forest. What a strange place that must be, I thought, where your feet were on the ground and your head was in the sky!

Was it possible to get there some day and find out what it was like? I stood in wonder, trying to comprehend how long it might take, traveling on foot, to reach that place where the sky met the land.

"You would never reach it," said Traiben, "not even if you marched for a thousand thousand lifetimes."

"And why is that, can you tell me? It looks far, yes, but not as far as all that."

Traiben laughed. "You would march forever."

"Explain yourself," I said, starting to grow irritated with him now.

"The World has no end," said Traiben. "You can walk around it forever and ever and the horizon will always lie ahead of you as you walk toward it."

"No. How can that be? When you walk somewhere, sooner or later you get where you're going."

"Think, Poilar. Think. Imagine yourself walking around a huge round ball. A ball has no end."

"But the World does," I said, with a surly edge to my voice. Traiben could be maddening when he insisted on making you think. Thinking was play for him, but it was work for most of the rest of us.

"The World is like a ball. See, see, where it curves away from us in the distance?"

I stared. "I don't see."

"Look harder."

"You are a great pain sometimes, Traiben."

"No doubt that I am."

"And any fool can tell you that the World is flat."

"Any fool can, yes," he said. "Certainly that is true."

But all the same, saying so doesn't make it flat."

I looked toward the horizon. Perhaps the land did curve away a little out there. A little, perhaps. But what Traiben was saying was blasphemy, and it made me uncomfortable. The World is the Boat of Kreshe, floating on the surface of the Great Sea. Boats are longer than they are wide, and not round anywhere. A ball will float on water also, yes. But the World is not a ball. Still, I had to admit to myself that I could see a slight curvature far off near the horizon.

A trick of my vision, I told myself. The floor of the World is as flat as a carpet and it continues in that flatness until one comes to the edge, where the land drops off into the Great Sea. Traiben is too intelligent for his own good, I told myself: sometimes he sees things that are not there and builds strange theories about them, and then he treats you with condescension because you will not agree with him that things are the way he tells you that they are.

I shrugged and we began to talk of other matters. Otherwise I might have been tempted after a time to throw him over the side of the Wall, which is no way to treat your closest friend.

We wondered, as we climbed, why we saw no sign of the myriad others who must have come this way before us over the centuries: no campsites, no discarded trash, no lost tools, no burial cairns. After all, our village had sent its Forty up the mountain every year for more years than anyone could reckon, and as I understand it we are not the only village at the base of the Wall that keeps the custom of Pilgrimage. It seemed to us also that there had been very few choices of route facing us during our ascent: that everyone who had come in earlier years from our village, at least, must of necessity have taken the same path we had, more or less. So where were their traces?

But that was a sign of how innocent of the realities of the Wall we still were. Even now, having been on Kosa Saag for so many weeks and—so we thought—having come to an appreciation of its vastness, we had no serious understanding of its true size. We continued to think of it in terms of the little road that runs up its flank out of our village, which at that level is the only route that a sensible person would follow in going upward: the familiar milestones, Roshten, Ashten, Glay, Hesperen, Sennt, and so forth. We imagined that the path we were taking now was the only logical extension of that road, and

that everyone who had come before us must have done as we had done. But what we were not taking into account was that our village road is to the Wall as a rain-drop is to a mighty river. Beyond Hithiat milestone the village road goes on to Varhad of the ghosts, yes, but there were other ways to ascend beyond Hithiat that we had not bothered to consider, and each of those ways forks outward into a dozen other ways, each of which would lead you back and forth in its own fashion across the face of the Wall and through the twisted and crumpled maze of interior routes, so that it is probably the case that no two parties of Pilgrims have ever taken the same way up Kosa Saag during the first few days of their climb. I should have kept in mind my mother's brother Urillin's parting words to me, that the Wall is a world, the Wall is a universe. But I did not arrive at an understanding of that until much later.

It was not to be long now, though, before we would find some sign of those who had undertaken the ascent of Kosa Saag before us.

We had slipped into a steady rhythm of climbing. Rise at dawn, bathe and eat, walk until midday. A meal; some singing; a time to relax; and then on the trail again until nightfall neared and it seemed wise to find a place to camp. We knew that we were gradually gaining elevation as we went, but this part of the climb seemed almost static, so gentle was the advance. It lulled us into a false sense of ease. Even Muurmut, who throughout the climb had been quick to dissent with any decision of mine that troubled him, was quiet. Most days the weather was fair, cooler than we were accustomed to but not at all unpleasant. Some days there was rain, occasionally even cold sleet; but we endured it.

Occasionally at night we heard the roaring of demons or monsters from the desolate hills above us. It was fearsome stuff, but we told ourselves that their roaring might be the worst part of them and they might well flee at our approach. Even the awareness that we now had exhausted all the food we had carried with us from the village did not trouble us. We foraged for our provender along the way, each of us taking a turn at sampling the strange berries and roots we found as Traiben had done that early time in the grove of the breast-fruit trees. Once in a while someone became ill for a few hours that way, and we learned that way which things not to eat; but in general we ate well. The hunting was good and there<sup>d</sup> was fresh meat to roast every evening.

Some couples formed but didn't last. I mated with sweet pretty Tenilda the Musician a few times, with Stum, and once with Min, who did whatever her friend Stum did, and with Marsiel the Grower. I would have mated with Thissa again also, but she was ever shy and uneasy, and I knew better than to approach her. But I looked longingly after her. And then there was the dark, quiet woman called Hendy, she who had been stolen and kept in the village of Tipkeyn from her tenth year to her fourteenth and so was like a stranger to us all. I desired her greatly and I knew I was not the only one. I spoke with her a few times, but it was like speaking with water, like speaking with the wind. Hendy went her own

way, saying little to anyone, making her own camp at a distance from ours, and though I was tempted now and then to venture over to her in the darkness and see if she would receive me, I had a good idea of what the reception was likely to be.

Galli, who long ago had been my lover and now was my friend, saw what I was doing. "You should leave both those women alone, Poilar," she said to me one afternoon as we trudged along an unchallenging trail.

"Which women?" I said.

"Thissa. Hendy."

"Ah. You've been watching me?"

"With half an eye. I need no more than that. Sleep with Stum, if you like. Sleep with Tenilda. Not those two."

"Those two are the only ones who truly interest me, Galli."

She laughed. "Even I interested you once."

"Once," I said. "Yes."

"But I'm too fat for you now? You prefer your women more slender, I think."

She sounded amiable and playful, but she was serious behind the sportiveness.

"I thought you were beautiful when we were young. I think so now. I'll spend tonight with you, if you like, Galli. You are ever a dear companion."

"A companion, yes. I take your meaning." She shrugged. She was not easily wounded in these matters. "As you wish. But if you want a mate, stay away from those two. No good will come of your bothering them. Thissa's frail and too easily harmed, and she's a Witch beside. Hendy is so very strange. Choose Stum, Poilar. She's a good woman. Strong, like me."

"Too simple, though. And too much the friend of Min. I think you take my meaning. Friendship between women is a good thing but it makes a man uneasy when his mind is on the Changes and her mind is with her friend."

"Then Tenilda. Beauty and intelligence there, and a good heart besides."

"Please," I said. "Enough of your help, Galli!"

I did indeed spend that night with her, for in truth I had never lost my fondness for her, even if the strong desire had long since abated. It was like spending the night with a favorite cousin, or even a sister. Galli and I lay together and laughed and told stories of old times and finally we made the Changes, in an easy, halfhearted way, and she fell quickly asleep beside me, snoring. Her great warm bulk nearby was comforting. But her words kept me awake. Thissa frail and too easily harmed, Hendy so very strange. Was that what attracted me to them? Was Galli right that I should put them from my mind?

Just as we were beginning to think once again that the climb would be as simple as this all the way to the Summit, we came to a place where all trails seemed to end and there was no way to proceed. This had happened to us before, and we had found some means of getting around the obstacle. But this time it seemed as though we were blocked wherever we turned.

We had been following a northerly track around the eastern face of the Wall. The wind, coming briskly out

of the north, was strong in our faces, and the air was clear and fresh as young wine, and far below we could see the dull silver line of what must have been some gigantic river, seemingly no thicker than a hair to us as it wound its way through a distant blue valley. We moved with a swift step, singing joyously as we marched. In late afternoon we found our path swinging sharply toward the west, and then abruptly came the great surprise, for we discovered ourselves looking into a gigantic rift that sliced deep into the heart of Kosa Saag. It was many leagues wide—how many, I could not say—from south to north, and seemed to plunge on westward to the limits of our vision, as though the Wall were actually two pieces from here on up, cut in half by this immense sundering that we now confronted.

We halted, astonished by the splendor and magnitude of what we beheld. Wherever we looked we saw new peaks, a host of them, pink stone strongly ribbed with black, an army of peaks of great size and majesty high above us on both sides of the rift. Lightning flashed atop those peaks. Feathery strands of cloud, like veils of the sky, blew straight southward from their tips, quivering as if whipped by a terrible gale.

I had never seen such beauty. There was a wondrous music in it that filled my soul so full that I had to struggle for breath. What a grand sight it was! It was so grand that it terrified me. It seemed as if the sky were breaking open up there, and strange light was shining through a window that opened out of the future. I felt sure that it must be the light of other days I saw, time running backward, events from beyond the end of the world shining toward the beginning. There were gods walking around up there. I heard their rumbling footsteps. I wondered if the First Climber had come this way in his pioneering ascent, whether he had looked upon this sight which now so dazzled me. He must have, I thought. He must. And had been inspired by the grandeur of it to continue his upward journey to the abode of the gods. As was I. As was I.

I stood staring, lost in awe.

Naxa came up alongside me and said, "It is the land of the Doubles that we see. Or rather, we see its light, for there is no way we can see the land of the Doubles itself."

"The Doubles?"

"Our other selves, perfect and invulnerable. They live in the Double World, which hangs downward in the sky and touches the upper reaches of the Wall. It is all written in the Book of the Double World."

"That's not a book that I know," I said. "You must tell me more about it some day."

"Yes," Naxa said, and smiled his annoying little smile; and I knew I would never hear a thing about the Double World from him again. But I would learn of it somehow from another source, I vowed.

I couldn't take my eyes from those lofty peaks. None of us could. Wherever we looked, great stony spires whirled toward Heaven. A hundred craggy pyramids of tumbled rock jutted into the sky on all sides of us. Some seemed kindled into pink flame by the light of setting

Ekmelios. Some, which must have been capped by snow, blazed such a fierce white that we could hardly bear to look at them for long. Bright rainbows leaped from gorge to gorge. Below us, looping saddles of rock descended dizzily into a dark chasm that seemed to have no floor. We saw the tops of gigantic black trees, far below, trees which must have been fifty times a tall man's height.

As we stood lost in all this magnificence, Dorn the Clown came to my side and said quietly to me, "Poilar, our path ends a hundred paces in front of us."

"This is no moment for joking, Dorn."

"And I offer you no jokes. The path drops off into utter nothingness. I've just been to see. There's no way forward from here at all."

It was the truth. Our little cliffside trail ran a short way into the rift, narrowing as it went, and simply disappeared not very far ahead. I followed it to its end and finally found myself standing in a place scarcely wider than my own feet, clinging to the mountain's rough skin and peering awestruck into windy emptiness. There was nothing whatever in front of me but the open air of the great rift. To one side of me was the Wall, to the other was the air. Only one direction remained, and that was behind me, the path by which we had just come. We were trapped in this stony pocket. We had wasted many days: weeks, even. It seemed to me we had no choice but to retrace our way, returning along the gentle, deceptive grade we had been following until we discovered some line of approach that would allow us to resume the ascent.

"No," said Kilarion. "We'll go up the Wall."

"What?" I said. "Straight up?"

Everyone was laughing at poor stolid Kilarion.

"Straight up," he said. "It can be done. I know that it can. There's a place a little way behind us where the face is cracked and knobby. That'll provide us with handholds. The gods have already given us sucker-pads. Between the one and the other, we'll be able to make it."

I turned and looked back. What I saw was a bare sheet of vertical stone that rose so high it made my neck ache to look up at it. In the afternoon shadows I made out what might have been a few spurs of rock protruding from it, far above.

"No one can climb that, Kilarion."

"I can. You can. We all can. It's not as high as it looks. I'll go up and show you. And then we'll all go up. Otherwise we might have to turn back as far as the place where Stapp died before we find another way through. I'd rather walk up the side of this mountain than see Stapp's grave again."

Kilarion had shown us already that he was good at finding trails, that in fact he had some natural gift for divining the ways to conquer Kosa Saag. Perhaps he was right again. But it was getting too late in the day to make this attempt, even assuming it could be done at all. I said, "We'll go back until we find a place to camp, and stay there for the night. In the morning you and I will try this wall, Kilarion."

"I know we can make it."

"You know that *you* can make it. I want to see if the rest of us can."

And so we doubled back through the deepening shadows to locate a campsite. In our exhilaration that day none of us had noticed the way the trail was pinching in; retracing it now, I thought for a time we would have to go all the way back to last night's campsite to find a place wide enough to be safe for sleeping, and that would mean many hours of risky hiking in the dark. But we did not have to do that. Another campsite that we hadn't troubled to take note of when we were coming the other way lay only an hour back from trail's end, next to a tiny trickle of fresh water. The site was small but adequate, and we huddled in there as best we could, listening to the wind whistling above us.

In the morning Kilarion and I set out together to attempt the climb.

We both carried our full packs. The test would have been meaningless otherwise. Kilarion chose the place where we would ascend, walking back and forth along the trail for nearly an hour before deciding on it.

"Here," he said at last.

I looked up. The Wall here seemed smooth and utterly vertical.

"There's water oozing here," said Kilarion. "See? There will be cracks in the rock." We unpacked our climbing ropes and hitched them about our waists. Then we turned away from each other to transform our left hands for the climb. Like most men I am uneasy about performing any sort of shapechanging in front of a stranger of my own sex, and it seemed that Kilarion was the same way. When we faced each other again we had brought forth our sucker-pads. I saw Kilarion's eye dart questioningly toward my lame leg, as though he was wondering why I had not changed that too while I was at it. But he didn't say it. I gave him a flinty glance by way of telling him that there was nothing I could do about that leg, and that in any case it was no handicap to me. And I reached around behind me into the pack, where I kept the little idol of Sandu Sando that Streltsa had forced upon me on the day of Departure, and rubbed it twice for luck along its holy place.

"Ready?" he said.

He slammed his climbing-hook into the rock, pulled himself upward on it, and began to walk up the sheer stony face.

When the slack in the rope that linked us was almost gone, I followed him. I had climbed many a rock wall in my training years, though never one like this; but I told myself that it only was a question of addressing each moment of the climb in its turn, rather than thinking about the totality of what needed to be done. Kilarion moved swiftly and deftly above me, cutting back and forth along the rock to find the best handholds. As he had guessed the stone was riven with cracks, and there were spurs and even some narrow ledges on it too which had been invisible from below. I grabbed for the spurs; I wedged my hand or sometimes my whole arm into the cracks; I used my climbing-hook and my sucker-pads to pull me past the smooth sections. And I rose quickly and effi-



ciently, readily keeping pace with Kilarion as he went upward.

The essence of climbing a rock like this is remembering to let your legs do the work. The arms are agile and versatile but they soon grow weary if they are called upon to carry much of your weight. That was why Kilarion had looked dubiously at my twisted foot. Since he was going first, it would be up to me to hold us both in place if he were to fall; and he must have been wondering how much strength that bad foot of mine might actually have.

I would show him. I had lived with that foot, and the lame leg to which it belonged, for two tens of years. It had taken me this far up Kosa Saag. It would take me up this rock face, too, and all the way up the rest of the mountain.

Cunningly I wedged my toes into crevices as I reached for the handholds above. I kept myself well supported until I was ready to scramble to the next level. The bad leg was no poorer at this game than the other one: I had to insert it at a different angle, that was all.

The first minutes were easy ones. Then things grew a little more difficult, and I found that I had to lunge at some of the handholds, leaping up to them and leaving myself unsupported for a moment as I made the reach. Once a handhold crumbled like rotten wood at the touch of my hand and broke away; but I was braced by my feet when that happened.

My breath was loud in my ears; my heart pounded. Perhaps I felt afraid, a little. But Kilarion moved inexorably onward above me and I would not let him think that I couldn't keep up. As I had been trained to do, I plotted my course several moves in advance, constantly working out sequences, calculating, I will go *here* after I have reached *there*, and then I will go *here*.

There was one troublesome moment when I made the stupid mistake of glancing back over my shoulder to see how high I had risen. I found myself looking down into a gorge that seemed as deep as the Wall was high. My stomach lurched and my heart contracted as though it had been squeezed and my left leg began to twitch violently, jabbing rhythmically into the air.

Kilarion felt my jouncing motions rising up the rope to him.

"Are you dancing, Poilar?" he asked.

That was all it took, that one lighthearted question. I laughed and the terror drained out of me. I turned my concentration back to the rock.

You *must* concentrate in the most intense way. You must see nothing but the tiny crevices and glittering little crystal outcrops just in front of your nose. I went up, up, up. Now I was spreadeagled to my limits, inching along a pair of parallel ridges that were set precisely two Poilar-leg lengths apart to form a kind of chimney. Now I hung suspended from a horn of crystal no longer than my inner thumb. Now my cheek was flat against the rock and my feet groped for purchase in empty air. My arms ached and my tongue felt oddly swollen.

Then, suddenly, there was a hand dangling in my face and I heard Kilarion's ringing laughter as he reached for

my wrist, caught it, and pulled me up across a rough rocky cornice onto a place where I could roll over and lie flat.

"You see?" he said. "There was nothing to it!"

We were on top. The climb had taken forever, or else only a moment: I was not sure which. The only certain thing was that we had accomplished it. There had been times along the way, I realized now, when I had been sure we would perish. But now, as I lay laughing and gasping on a horizontal surface, it seemed to me that Kilarion was right, that there really had been nothing to the climb at all.

After a time I stood up. We had reached a broad plateau, so deep and wide that I thought at first that we had reached the Summit itself, the very top of Kosa Saag, for everything seemed flat in all directions. Then my eyes focused on the distance and I saw how wrong I was: for I could see now, so far away to the southwest that it was almost at the limits of my vision, the next stage of the Wall rising above the floor of the plateau.

It was a numbing sight. What I saw out there was a great shining mass of pale red stone, shrouded at the base by a swirl of misty morning air and disappearing overhead in thick clouds. It tapered upward to infinity in a series of diminishing stages. It was like one mountain rising upon another. The whole Wall must be like that, I realized: not a mountain but a mountain range, immense at the base, narrowing gradually as you went higher. No wonder we couldn't see the Wall's upper reaches from our valley: they lay hidden from our view within the natural fortress formed by the lower levels. I came now to understand that in truth we had only begun our ascent. By reaching this plateau we had simply completed the first phase of the first phase. We had merely traversed the outer rim of the foothills of the tremendous thing that is Kosa Saag. My heart sank as I began to comprehend that our climb thus far had been only a prologue. Ahead of us still lay this vast mocking pink staircase outlined against a dark, ominously violet sky.

I turned away from it. We could deal with that awesome immensity later. Sufficient unto the day is the travail thereof, says the First Climber; and He is right in that, as He is in all other things.

"Well?" Kilarion asked. "Do you think the others can get themselves up here?"

I glanced back over the edge of the rock face we had just ascended. The trail at the base of the vertical cliff was incredibly far below us; at this distance it seemed no wider than a thread. It was hard to believe that Kilarion and I had scrambled up such a height of inhospitable stone. But we had. We had. And except for a couple of troublesome moments it had been a simple steady haul, or so it seemed to me in retrospect. The climb could have been worse, I told myself. It could have been very much worse.

"Of course," I said. "There's not one of them who couldn't manage it."

"Good!" Kilarion clapped me on the back and grinned. "Now we go down and tell them, eh? Unless you want to wait here, and I go down and tell them. Eh?"

"You wait here, if you like," I said. "They'll need to hear it from me."

"We both go down, then."

"All right. We both go down."

We descended boldly, even rashly, quickly swinging ourselves from ledge to ledge with our ropes, hardly pausing to secure our holds before we were off again. The mountain air does that to you, that and the exhilaration of knowing that you have conquered fear and attained your goal. I suppose in our exuberance we might well have levered ourselves right off the face of the cliff into the abyss beyond the trail-ledge. But we did not; and quickly we were down again and trotting back to camp with the news of what we had achieved.

Muurmut said at once, "That way is impossible. I saw it myself last night. It goes straight up. Nobody could climb it."

"Kilarion and I have just climbed it."

"You say that you have, anyway."

I looked at him, wanting to kill. "You think that I'm lying?"

Kilarion said impatiently, "Don't be a fool, Muurmut. Of course we climbed it. Why would we lie about that? Climbing it isn't as hard as it looks."

Muurmut shrugged. "Maybe yes, maybe no. I say that it's impossible and that if we try it we'll die. You're stronger than any two of us, Kilarion. And you, Poilar, you can climb anything with your tongue alone. But will Thissa be able to climb it? Or Hendy? Or that darling little Traiben of yours?"

Clever of him to pick the three who mattered most to me. But I said sharply, "We'll all be able to climb it."

"I hate no. I say it's too dangerous."

I said him for inspiring doubt in us when what we needed now was sublime self-confidence. "What are you suggesting, then, Muurmut? That we sprout wings and fly ourselves to the top?"

"I'm suggesting that we retrace our steps until we find a safer way."

"There is no safer way. This is our only choice. Short of simply creeping back to the village like cowards, that is, and I don't choose to do that."

He gave me a scowling look. "If we all die on this rock-climb of yours, Poilar, how will that get us to the Summit?"

This was opposition purely for the sake of opposition, and we both knew it. There were no paths to follow but this one. I said indifferently, "As you wish, Muurmut. Stay right here and live forever. The rest of us will continue the climb and take our chances on dying."

"Will they?" he asked.

"Let them decide," I said.

So we had what amounted to a second election. I asked who would come with Kilarion and me up the face of the rock, and immediately Traiben and Galli and Stum and Jaif and about half a dozen others raised their hands—the usual dependable ones. I could see doubt on the faces of Muurmut's henchmen Seppil and Talbol, and on Naxa's face also, and on a few of the women's.

More than a few, in fact, and some of the other men.

For a moment I thought the vote would run against me, which would end my leadership of the climb. Some of the waverers, the most timid ones, edged toward Muurmut as though they intended to remain behind with him. But then Thissa put her hand up high, and that seemed to be a turning point. By twos and threes the rest hastened to vote for the climb. In the end Seppil and Talbol were the only ones remaining in Muurmut's camp, and they looked at him in confusion.

"Shall we say farewell to the three of you now?" I asked.

Muurmut spat. "We climb under protest. You risk our lives needlessly, Poilar."

"Then I risk my own as well," I said. "For the second time this day." I turned away from him and went to Thissa, whose decision had swung the vote. "Thank you," I said.

The quickest flicker of a smile crossed her face. "You are welcome, Poilar."

"What a pain Muurmut is. I'd like to throw him over the edge."

She stepped back, gaping at me in shock. I could see that she had taken me seriously.

"No," I said. "No, I don't mean that literally."

"If you killed him it would be the end of everything for us."

"I won't kill him unless he forces me to," I said. "But I wouldn't weep for very long if he happened to have some terrible accident."

"Poilar!" She seemed sick with horror.

Perhaps Galli was right. Thissa was terribly frail.

For the general ascent we divided ourselves into ten groups, with two men and two women in each group except for one, which consisted only of Kilarion, Thissa, and Grycindil, because Stapp's death at the lake of pitch had left us with an unequal number. My own group was Traiben, Kreod, and Galli. Mainly we roped ourselves with the men going first and last and the two women in between, for most men are stronger than most women and we knew it would be best to have a man below to hold the group if anyone fell. But in my group I took care to have Traiben climb just below me and Galli to have the important bottom spot, for Traiben was weak and Galli was as strong as any man among us but Kilarion. I let Muurmut go up with his friends Seppil and Talbol and Thuiman, even though they were all strong men and would better have been used to bolster some of the women. But I thought, if any of them should fall, let them all fall together, and good riddance.

Once again Kilarion led the way. He was very much more cautious in the climb now with Thissa and Grycindil than he had been with me, and I understood that on our earlier climb he had been deliberately challenging me to keep up the pace. When his group had gone far enough up the cliff so that Grycindil had begun her climb, I started up alongside them, keeping a little to the left to avoid any pebbles that might be scraped loose from climbers above me. Ghibbilau the Grower took the next group up, with Tenilda and Hendy and Gazin. After

them went Naxa, Ment the Sweeper, Min, and Stum, and then Bress the Carpenter, Hilt of the Builders, Ijo the Scholar, Scardil the Butcher. And so we all went, group after group. Now and then I heard brittle nervous laughter from below me; but I knew better this time than to look back and see how they were doing.

Midway up, Traiben found himself in difficulties.

"I can't reach the next hold, Poilar!"

"Twist your hips. Angle your body upward."

"I've done it. I still can't reach."

Cautiously I glanced toward him, focusing my vision so that I saw Traiben and only Traiben, nothing below him. He was awkwardly wedged into a barely manageable foothold a few paces to the side of the route I had been taking, and he was straining desperately to get a grip on a jagged knob of red rock that was well beyond his grasp.

"I'll go a little higher," I told him. "When the rope goes taut, it'll pull you closer to it."

I forced myself upward. Lines of fire were running across my chest and back now from the effort of this second climb of the morning. But I pulled myself as far as I could go without making Traiben's weight an impossible burden on me that would rip me loose and send me plunging past him. Galli, far down the rock, saw what I was doing and called up to me that she had a good grip, that she would anchor me while I pulled. But I doubted that even she could hold us all if I fell, bringing Traiben down with me.

"I can't reach it," Traiben muttered. He spoke as if every word cost him a great price.

"Change!" Thissa called, from somewhere far above us. I looked up and saw her peering down at us over the cornice of the plateau. She was feverishly making witchery-signs at us, thrusting both thumbs of each hand at us like little horns. "Can you? Make your arm longer, Traiben! Make it stretch!"

Of course. Make it stretch. Why else were we given shapechanging by the gods?

"Do it," I said.

But controlling your Changes is not such a simple thing when you are in terror of your life. I watched as Traiben, trembling below me, struggled to adjust the proportions of his frame, shifting his shoulders about, loosening the bones of his back and arms to achieve the greater reach. I would have gone to him to stretch him myself, if I could. But I had to hold us in our place. His

tumbling went on and on, until my own arms began to tire and I wondered how long I could stay where I was. Then I heard an odd little giggle come from him and when I glanced at him again I saw him weirdly distorted, with his left arm far longer than the right and his whole body bent into a tortured curve. But he had hold of the knob he needed. He hauled himself up; the slack returned to the rope; I pressed myself against the rock until I was limp, and let my lungs fill gladly with air.

After that the rest was almost easy. For the second time that morning I came to the top of that wall of rock. I pulled Traiben over the cornice, and Kreod, and then came Galli on her own, looking as unwearied as if she had been out for a stroll.

One by one the other groups followed, until we were reunited on the plateau. I saw them all blinking and looking about in wonder, astounded by the size of this great flat place that Kilarion had brought us to.

"Where do we go now?" Fesild asked. "Where's the Wall?"

"There," I said, and pointed to that remote rosy bulk in the southwest, dimly visible behind its screen of wispy white clouds and congested haze.

The others began to gasp. I think they had mistaken the pink gleam of it on the horizon for the sky; but now the comprehension was breaking upon them, as earlier it had broken upon me, that we were looking at last upon the true Wall—the Wall of the many Kingdoms of which the fables told, the Wall within the Wall, the immense hidden core of the mountain sheltered here in these interior folds and gorges, that great thing which still remained for us to conquer.

"So far away?" she murmured, for the plateau was vast and anyone's soul would quail at the distance we had to travel across it in order to resume our climb. The magnitude of the climb that awaited us afterward took another moment to register itself upon her soul. Then she said, very softly: "And so high!"

We all were silent in the face of that colossal sun-shafted thing that lay before us. Such pride as we felt in having scaled the rock face below us shriveled to dust in the contemplation of what still must be done. I confess I tasted some despair myself, though I made my face into stone, so that none of them could see my feelings. For we were Pilgrims; and it is in the nature of Pilgrims to go onward. And so we would, on and on and on, until the Summit was within our grasp. ♦

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# AMAZING<sup>®</sup> STORIES

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If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING<sup>®</sup> Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1970s, plus every magazine from May 1990 through December 1992, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

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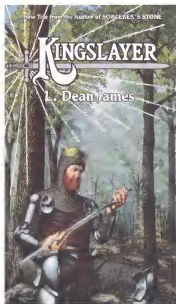


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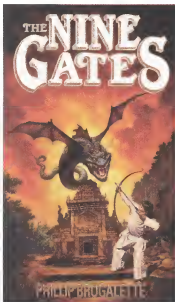


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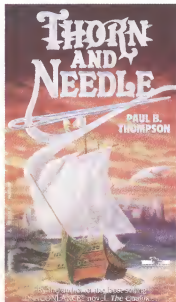


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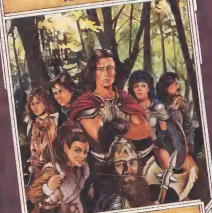
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